Monday, 11 December 2023
(10.30 am)

LADY HALLETT: Mr Keith.
MR KEITH: Good morning, my Lady. Today's witness is the Prime Minister.

## MR RISHI SUNAK (sworn)

 Questions from LEAD COUNSEL TO THE INQUIRYMR KEITH: Could you commence your evidence, please, Prime Minister, by giving us your full name.
A. Rishi Sunak.
Q. Mr Sunak, you have provided a witness statement for the purposes of this module, INQ000236674, which has been signed in the usual way, with the declaration of truth. We're very grateful to you for the provision of that statement. Also the further written material from members of your team, erstwhile team in then Her Majesty's Treasury, the statements of Mr York-Smith and Ms Josephs, all of which will of course be considered by the Inquiry in due course. Thank you very much for providing the statement and for attending today.

We understand that you wanted to say a few words by way of preface to the evidence that you'll be giving.
A. Thank you, Mr Keith.

Yes. Thank you for having me here today. I just 1

That is all correct, is it not?
A. Yes, it is.
Q. Mr Sunak, l'd like to start, please, just with some of the forensic building blocks underpinning your evidence today and the issue of the provision of material to the Inquiry.

In your statement, you set out how you "rarely used texts to communicate with colleagues". Your phone, you said, doesn't retain and nor do you have access to text messages at all relating to the period of the crisis. And in addition you said although on occasion you used WhatsApp to communicate around meetings and logistics and so on, you generally were only party to WhatsApp groups that were set up to deal with individual circumstances such as arrangements for calls, meetings and so on and so forth; is that broadly correct?
A. Yes, that is all broadly correct.
Q. You don't now have access to any of the WhatsApps that you did send during the time of the crisis, do you?
A. No, I don't. I've changed my phone multiple times over the past few years, and as that has happened the messages have not come across. As you said, I'm not a prolific user of WhatsApp in the first instance. Primarily communication with my private office and obviously anything that was of significance through
wanted to start by saying how deeply sorry I am to all of those who lost loved ones, family members, through the pandemic, and also all those who suffered in the various different ways throughout the pandemic and as a result of the actions that were taken. I've thought a lot about this over the past couple of years, it's important that we learn the lessons so that we can be better prepared in the future, and it's in that spirit and with enormous respect for all those affected that I'm here today. I look forward to giving evidence in a spirit of constructive candour to help the Inquiry with its deliberations.
Q. As is very well known, Mr Sunak, you were elected Member of Parliament for Richmond in Yorkshire in May 2015. You then became, in January 2018, a junior minister at what was then the Ministry of Housing, Communities \& Local Government. You then became chief secretary to the Treasury in July of 2019, and most relevantly for our purposes in February 2020 did you become Chancellor of the Exchequer after Sajid Javid MP?

You remained Chancellor of the Exchequer until July of 2022, so after the conclusion of the coronavirus pandemic crisis, and of course you became Prime Minister on 25 October 2022, following the resignation of Liz Truss as leader of the Conservative Party.
those conversations or exchanges will have been recorded officially by my civil servants, as one would expect.
Q. Evidence has been given to the Inquiry to the effect that Mr Johnson announced the institution of this Inquiry in May 2021, and around that time officials discussed the need for ministers and others to retain WhatsApps -- it was a matter of debate, in fact, in WhatsApp communications between officials themselves. Around that time, April and May 2021, did nobody say to you, "Chancellor, it's important that you do retain your WhatsApps" or "We need to put into place measures for them to be backed up in case they become relevant to an Inquiry"?
A. No, I don't recall either those conversations that you refer to between officials, but you might have been referring to officials in Number 10 --
Q. Yes.
A. -- rather than the Treasury? No -- yes, so -- and I don't recall anyone in my office making that recommendation or observation to me at the time.
Q. Do you happen to recall, it's probably quite a long shot, changing phones around that time as it happened?
A. Not around that time. As I've said, I have changed my phone multiple times in the years since then, and, as I said previously, every time that's happened the
messages wouldn't have come across. But, as I said, I'm not a prolific user of WhatsApp and with the private office, again, that would all have been recorded formally on the record. Or, indeed, where I've had exchanges with other individuals, some of those have been part of the evidence that's formed the Inquiry's deliberations.
Q. They have indeed, and I should make plain that we've got some of your messages from the other interlocutors to the communications.

Now, turning to the role of Chancellor of the
Exchequer, and it is of course because you were
Chancellor of the Exchequer that your evidence today is of the greatest importance, you describe how -- in your statement, you describe how there was obviously throughout the currency of the entire crisis a clash between public health epidemiological considerations and economic and fiscal issues, both by way of the economic considerations which had to be taken into account by the government, and also the vast economic and societal damage that would be done by decisions such as lockdowns.

In that debate, which raged throughout the pandemic, what was the general position of the Chancellor of the Exchequer? What position generally did you and 5
a way. As many people have alluded to, and I did at the time, there were a range of impacts, many of them socioeconomic, the impact on children's education, on mental health, on the issue in the criminal justice system as well as the pure economic impact, and it was important that policymakers considered the totality of those, and that was a consistent point throughout. But obviously my particular responsibility was the economy and fiscal policy.
Q. You do, I think, refer to how the issues confronting the government consisted of highly compelling competing interests; would that be a fair summary?
A. Yes, I think that is right. Again, as I said, none of these decisions were easy, as I think everyone has acknowledged --
Q. Indeed.
A. -- and the Prime Minister's incredibly difficult job was to have to balance many competing interests and make the best decision with the evidence and advice available to him at the time. And, again, only he could do that because only he saw the totality of those, with input coming from various different Cabinet ministers with their domains of expertise and responsibility.
Q. We will see in a moment the way in which the arguments were promoted by HMT, Her Majesty's Treasury. In

Her Majesty's Treasury take?
A. Well, I don't think I ever referred to it as a "clash", I think I saw my role as Chancellor of the Exchequer as making sure that the Prime Minister had the best possible advice, information, analysis relating to the economic impact or consequences of some of the decisions that he was having to make. Obviously the Chancellor of the Exchequer's role is to be responsible for the country's economic and fiscal policy and the financial services sector, so that was my primary responsibility in the role, and then as it pertained to the pandemic my jobs were not just to design and implement economic interventions like the furlough scheme or support for public services and businesses, but also, as I said, to provide analysis and advice to the Prime Minister as he made his decisions.

And more broadly, just touching on what you said at the beginning, Mr Keith, as a senior Cabinet minister, one of the consistent arguments or points that I made from the beginning, throughout, was just making sure that we collectively, and the Prime Minister, considered the totality of the impacts of the decisions that we were making. It wasn't, as -- I didn't ever describe it as a clash just between public health and economics; I think that's to think about it in far too narrow 6
general terms, however, was it a question of putting before the Prime Minister your and HMT's views on the likely consequences of whatever decision might be taken by him, or did you engage in the ultimate debate as to what should be done? Did you promote a particular outcome in relation to, for example, lockdown decisions, decisions to ease, decisions to institute a roadmap, decisions whether or not to have a circuit-breaker and so on? Did you promote a particular position as part of your role as Chancellor of the Exchequer, or was it just a question of providing broad advice as to the consequences?
A. I think it's probably difficult to generalise in that way, it would depend on the decision confronting the Prime Minister or the committee or the meeting that I would be participating in. So it wouldn't be one consistent answer throughout the pandemic, it would be context-specific. But as a general rule, my primary responsibility was to feed in advice and analysis as to the economic consequences of what was being considered, of course where the Prime Minister would ask for my broader opinion I'd always be happy to give it to him, if it was something that I thought I could offer on the basis of some element of knowledge. But broadly, primarily, my role was to feed in the economic advice
and analysis, and I can provide opinions to the
Prime Minister as and when he would have requested them.
Q. Do we take it from the fact that this advice was given to the Prime Minister that the Prime Minister ultimately was the decision-maker who mattered? It's notable that a great deal of the advice that you provided was directed exclusively at the Prime Minister, as opposed to, perhaps, exclusively or in large part to Cabinet or the other bodies? Of course you address them as well, but the final decision-making appears to be concerned solely with the Prime Minister?
A. Well, I think it's absolutely right to say that the Prime Minister, as I say in my evidence, was the ultimate and sole decision-maker. I think that's -I don't think that's particularly controversial or challenged. Only he has the ability to make those decisions across competing interests.

I wouldn't say it's fair to say I only fed advice in to him. I'm sure we will go on to discuss it shortly, but there were various committee structures that were set up to facilitate that decision-making and provide forum for debate and discussion where the Prime Minister could hear different views from colleagues and obviously through bilateral meetings as well. So there was an extensive process by which information was shared. 9

Prime Minister obviously is responsible for setting up the decision-making structures that work best for him, and he had done that through the taskforce, the Covid-Os and Ss, complimented by bilateral meetings with different ministers. All of that really is a question for the Prime Minister as to how he wanted to hear the arguments and see the evidence, analysis from colleagues. And I participated in all of those, as was my job, and I certainly felt that I always had that opportunity, so there was no point did I feel that I didn't have that opportunity to input analysis or my point of view into the process, but in general the way that decisions were made was through the committee structures that he had set up, Covid-O, Covid-S and Cabinet, for the most part. That's where decisions were taken.

Now, there may be an iterative process leading up to that final decision-making meeting, but again that's a question for the Prime Minister as to how he liked to organise that. For my part I would say I was always able to feed in appropriately and adequately into those mechanisms. And ultimately it was up to him how he wanted to hear the different views from different people, but ultimately the decision was made in one of those forums, as one would expect in the way our system

Often, in the first instance, the Treasury would be sharing or I would be sharing that information with, as it later became, the Covid Taskforce, whose job it was to co-ordinate and synthesise information from many departments to put together to Cabinet or Cabinet committees or presumably the Prime Minister himself so that he could make his decision.
Q. There was indeed a very developed process and it was a process that altered over time?
A. Yes.
Q. The government put into place a number of changes in order to make it work better, and we can see the progress from the MIGs at the beginning to Covid-S and Covid-O and so on.

But the material shows, Mr Sunak, that when it came to a hard-edged decision, whether or not the Prime Minister would impose a lockdown or not impose a circuit-breaker or institute the tier system, the Treasury was astute to ensure that it provided its opinion to the Prime Minister to the very last moment. You would try, in effect, to get the last word, to say "Prime Minister, these are the consequences of whatever decision you will take and you need to know what they are"?
A. I -- I'm not sure that's a fair characterisation. The 10
of government works.
Q. So that we're absolutely clear about this, there was never a time when you felt that you didn't have an adequate opportunity of making your views plain? Whatever it was that you wished to say about the various difficult decisions that the Prime Minister faced, you had that opportunity?
A. Yeah, as a general observation about my reflection over the period, I don't sit here today thinking: gosh, there were many opportunities where I didn't have that opportunity. As a general rule I always felt that I could. I mean, I saw the Prime Minister probably more than I saw my own wife for this period of time. We were working very closely together, as I was with my other Cabinet colleagues, and as a general rule I was able to participate in everything that I felt I needed to or ought to in order to get the evidence, analysis to him in a way that he could use it to make decisions.
Q. Let's look for a moment at the structure of the way by which material and analysis was put before the Prime Minister.

Have you set out in your statement -- and we'll have, please, the statement at page 23 -- the various different ways in which HMT analysis was shared with the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister? There were 12
shared weekly monitoring products, there was a regular economy update meeting, you refer to particular advice on 14 February, a paper in March. There was then a rolling process by which HMT officials contributed to Cabinet Office advice for the Prime Minister on the re-opening of non-essential retail. There were obviously publications of your own department's economic analysis, we can see that at paragraph 75.

And going back a page to page 22, paragraph 72, have you provided certain particularly important papers around about the time of the first lockdown decision, dated 12 and 15 March, and then after the decision, 15 April?

We'll have a quick look at one or two of those to see the nature, at that time, of the Treasury intervention.

So INQ000232069.
We can see here a document with a read-out of a Prime Ministerial meeting on Sunday 15 March, so the day before the lockdown decision, Prime Minister, that's correct, isn't it?
"For a meeting at 5pm ... the PM commissioned advice on further options ...
"It was agreed that a package of announcements would be put to COBR on Monday [the 16th] ..." 13
see, was on labour supply impacts and analysing days that would be lost through isolation policies.

Obviously as the pandemic -- and in the following weeks the Treasury was able to significantly increase the sophistication with which it was modelling the impacts of things, not least because they were actually happening. It broadened the use of data that we had access to, on a much more real-time basis, from non-traditional sources. It procured and developed other models, particularly at a microeconomic level, on firm -- firm level impacts on employment and insolvency, and it extensively engaged with external experts as well. So I think this is very early on. As the pandemic progressed, what you'll see, as I said, is the detailed nature of the analysis will have improved considerably over time.
Q. Would it be fair to say that perhaps on account of the speed with which the first lockdown decision was made, the degree of fiscal and economic analysis that was placed before the Prime Minister, by comparison to later, was significantly different, it was a much -there was a much narrower debate, if you like, about the economic and fiscal consequences at that time by comparison to the second and third lockdown decisions?
A. I think that is -- that is fair, not least because this

And then you can see at the bottom of the page, "Summary of papers to PM ", and then information about the various options confronting him: household isolation, atypical setting, shielding/social distancing, and so on.

If we look at page 5, you will see "HMT Position", and did your department set out, in relation to each of the particular interventions or social distancing measures, what the consequences would be or would be likely to be in terms of impact, economically and fiscally?

Then if we look over the pages to 6 and 8 , we can see what the impact would be fiscally in terms of a number of other particular options.

So does that give a fair indication of the sort of information which your department provided to the Prime Minister?
A. I mean, yes. All I'd say is this was very, very early on, as you said, so this was --
Q. It is.
A. -- we were weeks into this, and I think what you'll see over the duration of the next 18 months is the -- I'd say the quality and extra granularity of the information that -- and analysis that we were able to provide improved considerably. The focus early on, as you can 14
was so unpredictable and uncertain. Once we had entered into the first lockdown then you actually had data as to the impact of these measures, and you could use those to forecast what would happen in the future when you were going to repeat them. But at this point this was not something that anyone had grappled with before or modelled with any precision, so it was very hard to be precise about the impacts. And, as I say, we developed more modelling capability, broadened the source of data over time. And external groups like the OBR, who is, of course, the government's independent forecaster, themselves, in about the middle of April, published quite extensive independent forecasting of the impact on the economy from Covid. And again, they continued to iterate that, as did the Bank of England and other external bodies. So I think there was just a considerable body of external and internal work that was done from this point onwards, and -- but as you say, this was very early on.

In terms of the other economic information that was relevant around exactly the same time as this note was the situation in the gilt markets.
Q. We'll come to that.
A. Oh, fine. Because they're -- it's around the same kind of time, just days after that, from memory.

16
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first and foremost I was always in a position where I felt I had the opportunity to provide the Prime Minister with relevant advice and information that he needed. That's the first thing to say.

I think the second broad observation I have was that the Covid-O and Covid-S structure actually worked, I thought, quite well. It was modelled on something that had -- the Prime Minister himself I think had brought in during the Brexit process, so it was a template that had -- that I participated on, more at the O level in those days -- so it's a template that had been used before, had been shown to work.

My general recollection is that it was a good structure and it did that separation between broader strategy and operations. I thought it was a structure that made sense and I found typically effective. I think my significant recollection of this time was the lack of the taskforce model early on, which was corrected by about June, and then improved as well over time. And I think that is -- that was an improvement, and I think actually that is a model that now is ready to be deployed off the shelf and rightly so. But not having a taskforce at the centre that -- I think it was described as the gearbox or the engine room, that could synthesise across departments the information and
A. You know, that's not -- that's not my strong
recollection. I mean, to reiterate what I said before, 18
analysis and advice coming in for the Prime Minister to present things in the round together with input from SAGE, I think was a necessary and an important step in improving the quality of the decision-making and the sharing of information. And so, as I said, that was not there in the first couple of months, and clearly at that phase it was -- DH were described as the lead department, with the response particularly in March and April, and I think if this happened again one would want to make sure that that taskforce model was there from the beginning, you know, day one, day zero, because that definitely improved things.
Q. It was Mr Cummings who referred to the Cabinet Office as being a gearbox but with sand in it. Did you as Chancellor take a view as to the efficiency of the Cabinet Office, particularly in those early days from March through to May, by which time, as you rightly say, the Covid-S, Covid-O structure was put into place?
A. Look, I think it was very difficult. I think it's obviously easy to sit here now and say taskforce was better, of course it was, Covid-O and Covid-S was better, yes, of course it was, and it improved decision-making. I think those first few weeks were extremely difficult for everybody. I don't doubt that everyone was trying very hard to do the best that they 20
could in trying circumstances, dealing with something that we hadn't dealt with before. So it's -- you know, I wouldn't sit here and say that people weren't doing the best they could, I think they were. But it's clear that the taskforce structure, the O and the S structures, made things, I think, work more effectively and efficiently, and they were not there right at the beginning, and it's good that they were implemented, and good that they continued to improve over time.

But I think the other -- just the other thing I'd say is I think there is this perception that somehow decisions are not being made in these fora, but I think they're really -- my strong recollection is that they were. The Covid-Os and Covid-S were the places where an appropriate group of people came together to discuss, to deliberate, for the Prime Minister to make his decision. Now, there's obviously a trade-off between speed of decision-making and the number of people involved, I mean, it was ever thus, and I think there's probably no perfect answer, ultimately it's for the Prime Minister to himself figure out what the right balance between those two things is. Broadly I thought the O , the S structure did that. But also, decision-making is an iterative process, that's the reality of government. I think what would be normal is 21
you as the occupant of Number 11. You couldn't not have seen how Number 10 was responding to this unprecedented crisis?
A. So you described, not my word, people saying about
dysfunction in Number 10 or the Cabinet Office.
Obviously I -- you know, I didn't work directly in
Number 10 or in the Cabinet Office, so it's hard for me to comment on that other than to say that my interactions with Number 10 and the Cabinet Office during this period felt fine to me.

Again, I'd go back to, broadly: was I able to input advice to the Prime Minister or when decisions were being made? I felt I was. I didn't feel I'd been shut out or not able to participate.

And my recollection of that period, that early period, was a series of, I think as it was then, as you say, not Covid-O, and Covid-S, they were probably COBR meetings, which involved groups of people considering these things, and -- so lots of people around the table was my recollection, at the key moments on 16 March, 9 March. As far as I can remember, at all of those points -- there was a COBR meeting, I was probably at it. There were minutes that were circulate -- well, SAGE minutes that had been circulated that formed part of the advice pack. Deliberations were made, decisions 23
that there would be a series of potentially bilateral meetings or a small group meeting leading up to the final decision meeting. I think that's completely fine. Every Prime Minister will have a different decision-making process that works for them. That's -the previous Prime Minister I think liked that. I think nothing wrong with it, quite healthy, it allowed him time to digest the arguments. So I don't think there's anything wrong with there being a series of meetings considering the same topic before a final Covid-O, Covid-S or Cabinet meeting to make -- to take the final decision.
Q. Your answer, at least at the start, Mr Sunak, was heavily predicated upon the existence of Covid-S and Covid-O, but in the earlier period, particularly around the time of the first lockdown and those decisions in March and April, the evidence from a number of witnesses is to the effect that there was a circumvention of Cabinet governance, a certain level of dysfunction, and I emphasise it's only evidence and these are all matters for my Lady in due course, but the witnesses have spoken about dysfunction in Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, and how the system around the Prime Minister was not working well, to put it neutrally.

That must have been something that was apparent to 22
were taken quite quickly, and acted on, in all of those key moments. So that's my general recollection of that -- of the period.

You're absolutely right, and as I've said, the formal taskforce structure and the O and the S structure hadn't been established at this point, but things were moving so quickly. And largely, as I'm sure we'll get on to, the government -- the Prime Minister just largely acted on the advice that was put in front of him from SAGE with regard to what interventions to implement at what time. I mean, that's my strong recollection of this period of those three weeks or two weeks in March.
Q. The public health considerations took primacy --
A. Absolutely.
Q. -- in effect --
A. Yeah.
Q. -- which is why although the arguments about the likely impact of lockdown were made, they didn't assume anything like a comparable strength in terms of the overall --
A. Yeah, and you've said that before and I agree, it was the -- Department of Health were very clearly, as per all the evidence, the lead department leading the response. My strong recollection of this period is the advice would come in from SAGE -- obviously that advice 24
changed over the weeks, which I'm sure we'll get into, but largely my recollection is the government acted on the advice it was given with regard to interventions. And the economic advice, as you pointed to, was provided, I would say not just for information, that's to downplay it, but it was not driving the conversation, and -- that's right in the way you've described it.
Q. In your statement you describe how you would, in addition to these formal procedures, see the Prime Minister informally but that no decisions of significance were made in those situations and you state all major decisions were made within formal structures. But presumably during these informal debates Covid was at least part if not the predominant part of the debate and how, economically and fiscally, there were issues to be debated?
A. Yes. I think when I was talking about that, I wasn't referring to this period. I mean, obviously I didn't know the Prime Minister particularly well at this point in time, when I became Chancellor. Obviously that relationship grew over time and, you know, both of us living in the same building. So -- and this went on for almost two years. So over the course of that period, as we got to know each other better, there's clearly more opportunities for -- you know, we might be sitting in 25
to have had conversations about life, family, friends, work, at the same time. But in terms of decision-making structures, as I'm -- I'm very clear that, you know, there was rigorous and proper debate and deliberation with colleagues in those structures after they were set up, and even before that more generally, and that was my consistent view throughout. I mean, those debates and deliberations did happen throughout with not just me but with other colleagues as well.
Q. I ask, as you know well, because of the article in The Spectator, "Rishi Sunak on what we weren't told", dated 27 August 2022, in which the author of the article says that you said that:
"[You] tried not to challenge the Prime Minister in public, or leave a paper trail. 'I'd say a lot of stuff to him in private' ..."

This is of course -- it's on page 8 if you want to see it in all its glory:

This is all, of course, in the context of Covid. The article is, of course, about your role in Covid. And, as I say, it says:
"He tried not to challenge the Prime Minister in public, or leave a paper trail. 'I'd say a lot of stuff to him in private,' he says. 'There's some written record of everything. In general, people leak it -- and 27
the garden together at the weekend or something. So -you know, as is completely normal -- so it wouldn't just be Covid because by the point those types of conversations were happening between us, there were other things as well --
Q. Not just Covid, but of course always with an economic or fiscal bent to it? That is, of course, what your role was, you were the Chancellor of the Exchequer.
A. Yes, I wouldn't say all our conversations were work-related, we were also able to talk about things that were not work-related, but I'd say my conversations with him on policy would obviously be predominantly based on the economic and fiscal considerations of what we were doing.
Q. Of course, they were debates about the matters which were of the greatest concern to the government at that time. That is why, of course, you were discussing them with the Prime Minister.

> I ask --
A. I mean, I'd say -- yes, I think there is a -- I think you just work with colleagues, and if you happen to be neighbours it's impossible not to see each other outside of a formal Covid-S meeting. That's just the practical reality of being neighbours and sharing a garden and living in the same building. So it would be weird not 26
it causes problems'."
Why, if you were debating these hugely important topics with the Prime Minister, was it important not to leave a paper trail?
A. That's -- well, I think as the article says, that's not something that l've said, the quote from me is "I'd say a lot of stuff to him in private", and in fact there is a written -- there is some written record of everything.

So, I mean, of course I had conversations with the Prime Minister. As I said, we -- you share a garden, you're neighbours, you live together, of course there'd be conversations I'd be having with him and -- in terms of written records, I mean, I'm sure we'll get on to it, at multiple moments I would write to him with -- just so that he could have it in one place, a set of thoughts or analysis from me with regard, perhaps, to exit roadmaps or the 2-metre to 1-metre or -- and there will be others, or re-opening or travel. You know, so those are document -- there is actually, in fact, lots of different bits of evidence that you have and that we've provided of when I did actually write to him formally at particular points where I thought it made sense to lay out a set of arguments from me to him -- and --
Q. We will look at some of the bilateral --
A. Yeah.
Q. There are many, many bilateral meetings where formally your officials and yourself and the Prime Minister and his officials met to talk about Covid-related issues as well as all the other economic-related issues that you raised. It's just that, what is the Inquiry to make of the suggestion here, to which you do appear to lend your support, that there was a form of communication between the Prime Minister that was not recorded and was obviously of significance?
A. Well, I think the point I'd probably challenge is that it's of significance. I think it is genuinely impossible for every single conversation between two Cabinet ministers, whoever they are, to be recorded. I mean, there aren't civil servants following Cabinet ministers through the division lobbies, on a typical evening, where they might be chatting about something, or if I was having lunch with my family in the garden at the same time that the Prime Minister was on a typical weekend in Downing Street, and we'd obviously be chatting as we were barbecuing or something. I mean, it's just -- it's clearly impractical to think that every single conversation between two Cabinet ministers can be recorded in that way, but -- I think everyone would accept that.

But I think that's obviously fine because what is 29

Or at least that's what the journalist said you were implying.
"'I wasn't allowed to talk about the trade-off,' says Sunak. Ministers were briefed by No 10 on how to handle questions about the side-effects of lockdown. 'The script was not to ever acknowledge them. The script was: oh, there's no trade-off, because doing this for our health is good for the economy."'

We need to be quite clear, don't we, that the reality was that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, yourself, and HMT, took every opportunity to bring to the attention of the Prime Minister the potential consequences of the lockdown decisions and the fiscal and economic harm that would be done. That's very apparent, would you agree with that?
A. Yes, that was my primary responsibility, and that's what we did.
Q. And if we look at INQ000182359, this is an analytical note which expressly refers to it being a trade-off between continuing Covid-19 social distancing and minimising foregone economic activity and other costs.

Was this a document produced by HMT dated 22 April provided to the "Quad" group of ministers, that is to say the group of yourself, the first Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Raab, Mr Gove and Mr Hancock, whilst 31
happening is when there are formal decisions to be made and formal conversations to be had, those are happening with officials, they are minuted, they're happening in Cabinet committees or Covid-Os or Covid-Ss or in Cabinet itself or in bilateral meetings, and the decision itself is made in those forums, and that's -- ultimately what matters is the decision and how it was made and who fed into it. And that's all a matter of public record and recorded correctly.

I mean, I think it would be -- it's implausible to think that every single conversation between two Cabinet ministers could be recorded in that way, I mean, that's just not practical or plausible.
Q. All right.

Page 3 of the same article, and it may be that you've got something to say about what should be taken from this article generally, but on page 3 you refer to the -- in general terms, conversations that you had with the Prime Minister and to the debate that went on constantly around the Prime Minister as to what decisions should be taken.

## You say:

"A cost-benefit calculation -- a basic requirement for pretty much every public health intervention -- was never made."

30
the Prime Minister was ill? So a Treasury document that expressly addresses the trade-off between continuing social distancing and economic activity.
A. I'm not familiar with that document, so I don't know if it's clear who it's come from --
Q. Well, you may not know the individual document, but --
A. Well, I do recall, because the person who wrote it, I'd -- I worked with him in a previous guise, and I don't think he did work at Treasury, I thought he was in a different department, so it's not obvious to me that the document does come from the Treasury, or not. So I can't -- I can't say that it does come from the Treasury.

My point, though, referring to the quote you had from the Spectator article previously, was not about the substance of the discussions that were happening in government, which, as you rightly said, and -- and I was making the point about some of the consequences, again not just economic but the other impacts in all other walks of life as well. The point was about the communication strategy. And I can certainly sympathise, actually, with a communications strategy that wanted to simplify things, because we were dealing with something that was, again, unprecedented. We didn't know how people would respond, behave, comply. And so the -32
you know, the sense was a simpler communication strategy 1 would be better for achieving that objective, and it was just better to focus on the health impacts and -because that would be the way to improve compliance.

And again I have sympathy as a reasonable argument to make, you know, but that argument that was made to achieve that aim came at the cost of not having from the beginning a broader conversation about the other impacts in other walks of life, and again impacts that may not be felt immediately but would be felt down the line. And I think that -- that was just -- that was the approach of the communications strategy. That's what I was referring to in the Spectator article.

And again, it doesn't mean that it was wrong, by the way, because I think it's a reasonable position to have taken that it was better to have a simpler communication strategy that didn't talk about all those other things, because we wanted people to comply with what we were asking them to do. Reasonable position. I was making the point that -- you know, I think you could have said actually we could have had a broader conversation from the beginning about some of these things. That was the point I was making in the article. But this document, as I said, I don't know or recollect.
Q. The article itself makes no reference to this being 33
lockdowns, that your position and HMT's position was that there is a trade-off: if you make a decision about -- if you make a decision to lock down, it's going to be enormously damaging. I mean, that was your raison d'être, was it not?
A. I think that -- I wouldn't quite put it like that, but I'd say my -- almost my constitutional responsibility as Chancellor of the Exchequer was to make sure that the Prime Minister had the economic -- well, the analysis and the advice relating to the economic and fiscal implications or consequences of the decisions that he was considering.
Q. Indeed.
A. Of course that was my job, and of course that's what I did. And I don't -- I don't think it's controversial, and indeed given -- I see now, and the evidence has been submitted to the Inquiry by many of the scientists from SAGE acknowledging that the benefit -- I think the Chief Scientific Adviser at the time said -- has said -former Chief Scientific Adviser said that the benefits of imposing lockdowns had to be balanced by policymakers against the social, health and other economic detriments that they would cause. Professor Edmunds said policymakers had to weigh up many other ethical, logistical and economic constraints. And again, I could
a comms issue, it simply quotes as you saying:
"'The script was not to ever acknowledge them. The script was: oh, there's no trade-off, because doing this for our health is good for the economy."'

But you say that was just a question of communication policy?
A. Yes, because I think -- well, if you can bring it back.
Q. Page 3 of INQ000280042, and it's the top of the page, Mr Sunak.
A. Yes, it was -- it was -- and that is talking about the comms strategy, because it's what you're allowed to talk about, it says very specifically, and then, again, not my words but the author's words:
"Ministers were briefed by No 10 on how to handle questions about the side-effects of lockdown."

That, again, is briefing before people do media appearances, and the script, in a generic sense, probably refers to the standard what Number 10 produces and still produces to this day as a kind of broadcast script or broadcast brief that has the government's overall public-facing narrative. So that is very much what those comments are talking about.
Q. But there was no doubt whatsoever, as far as you could tell, in the public's mind that as Chancellor you were warning of the economic and fiscal consequences of 34
quote, you know, actually the previous Chief Scientific Adviser also said there were costs in other domains of life, economic, people's wellbeing, education. All those needed to be analysed. So I don't think it's particularly controversial to say that of course there are lots of other impacts that come from decisions --
Q. That --
A. -- but my particular responsibility was to make sure that the economic ones were considered or the Prime Minister had an opportunity to consider them.
Q. It is obvious that --
A. There's a separate question -- sorry to interrupt -- and then there's a separate question about how much it is appropriate to talk about those in public, which is what this refers to.
Q. We need to be clear about this, Mr Sunak. You made no bones about the fact that there was a trade-off, that there were huge, it's self-evident, devastating economic and societal consequences from the lockdown decisions. That is obvious. The whole country knows that.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, yourself, made no bones about it. The Treasury raised, quite properly, perhaps constitutionally, all the concerns that needed to be raised. But you reject the suggestion, which appears to be given by this article, that that full
debate, the nature of the trade-off, wasn't properly identified or at least wasn't properly ventilated by you, perhaps because of briefings by Number 10, and I want to ask you whether that was in fact correct?
A. Sorry, I'm not sure I understand the question here.
Q. Did ministers brief you, or rather did Number 10 brief you that you couldn't raise the obvious issue of the economic and fiscal harm that would be done by a lockdown decision? Was that not in fact a debate that was obvious to everybody and it was a debate in which you played a full part?
A. As I said, that debate was certainly something that happened in the deliberations. As we've previously been discussing, it didn't happen particularly extensively for the first lockdown, because everything happened very quickly at that point and was driven, as I said, largely by the public health advice. Over time that debate became, I'd say, more a feature of the discussions, particularly because we started to have more understanding and evidence of the impact, on the short term at least, of what lockdowns were doing or the NPIs were doing in other domains or other walks of life. So that was the kind of evolution of the debate inside of government.

As I said, from a comms strategy -- very
37

Prime Minister, is:
"READOUT: Friday bilat ..."
Is "bilat" a shorthand for the meetings that you had bilaterally with the Prime Minister?
A. Yes.
Q. "... on NPI [non-pharmaceutical interventions] easements 'no actions for teams just for info only'."

Your principal private secretary says:
"Following the inconclusive strategy meeting the
[Prime Minister]/[Chancellor] met and discussed the plan for NPI easements on Friday. No other minister included -- shows the strength of the [Chancellor's] voice in these discussions."

This email, did you see this email after the event? Did you see the read-out? Do you recall?
A. No, I wouldn't typically see these read-outs.
Q. All right. She does appear there to be referring to how, as the Chancellor, because of your ability to meet bilaterally with the Prime Minister, your voice carried a particular strength; would you agree?
A. I'm not entirely sure I would agree in any disproportionate sense, it's completely normal for the Prime Minister to meet with the Chancellor bilaterally, I do the same now in this job, previous Prime Minister did the same --
understandably, as I said, reasonable people can disagree -- simplicity of message is often important and the simpler message was just to focus on the public health side of it earlier on. And again, I think that evolved over time. And if you compare what was said in press conferences in the autumn, for example, when these debates were happening, it had evolved by that period of time. Earlier on it was certainly not a feature. I think you can just see that if you watch all the press conferences. And then when you get to the autumn you have, I think, in the press conferences a much more open discussion about the fact that there are all these other things that policymakers have to take into account. These aren't easy decisions, they're balance decisions, they're all different types of impact. You had, you know, whether it's Chris Whitty or Patrick Vallance saying all the things I've just said in press conferences in September and October, I don't think you would find those types of -- that type of communications all forming part of the message earlier on in the pandemic, I think that's probably fair to say.
Q. All right.

Could we have INQ000236586, page 1, please, which is an email from your principal private secretary, Elizabeth Perelman, dated 6 June 2020. The subject, 38
Q. Forgive me, there's no -- so that we're not at cross-purposes, there is no suggestion of any impropriety meeting with the Prime Minister bilaterally.
You are the Chancellor, he is the Prime Minister, it's a vital relationship to the workings of government. But I want to ask you to address the strength of your voice in those discussions on the issues which directly concerned the pandemic, because of the debate about SAGE and the NPI easements and --
A. Well --
Q. -- the plan, and so on?
A. -- as I've already said, I felt I always had the opportunity to convey my thoughts and provide advice to the Prime Minister, I said that early on, and that happened in a range of forums, whether in these bilateral meetings or through the smaller group meetings or the Covid-O or the Covid-S. I've been, I think, consistent in my evidence that I always felt I had the opportunity to provide the Prime Minister with advice.
Q. Indeed.
A. I wouldn't read anything particularly into the fact that I had a bilateral meeting with him, I'm sure he was having bilateral meetings with other ministers as well, all part of how he would like to make decisions, and that ultimately is a question for him, but for my part 40
of course I had the opportunity to feed in.
Q. If we look at page 2, we can see a reference to "Next Steps", and after a list of next steps or actions which are envisaged to be taken, your principal private secretary says this:
"On Monday I am just going to check where No10 have got to and ensure on track for Tuesday. Until announced you never know!"

That would appear on one reading to be a reference to an understanding held by her that there was a degree of backing and veering or change in position or perhaps just debate within Number 10 which meant that until decisions were actually announced there was a risk they might not be adhered to. Would you agree?
A. I think I touched on it in my responses earlier, that decision-making is a process, and every Prime Minister will have a different process by which they want to make decisions, and that will just be different depending on the personality, style of the person in the job. But my experience of the previous Prime Minister was, and I think entirely rightly, that for big decisions he would want to go over the arguments, test out different points of view. He might do some of that bilaterally with ministers, do some of it in smaller group meetings, and through that process, again, same way that you
process you hear different things which challenge
thoughts that you had before.
Q. INQ000236594, page 1 is another email from

Elizabeth Perelman to various recipients in the
Treasury. We can see at the bottom of that first page:
"The [Chancellor] in particular wanted to
[thank] you, [the economic] team, [the] health team and
[the] COVID team for all the work. The
briefs/[information] meant that [Chancellor] was well
armed to challenge/scrutinise the proposal ..."
I should say this is dated 9 October,
Prime Minister.
"... and had a level of detail beyond the rest of
the room which allowed us to make and land our
points......with a great result.
"An outline of the wider discussion is below, but afterwards there was a smaller
[Prime Minister]/[Chancellor] huddle and the upshot is:
"No final decision has been taken on the NPIs."
Then over the page, please:
"However the [Prime Ministerial] steer is that he is not minded to agree to the [Cabinet Office] proposal ... his preference is either do nothing or close pubs only ..."

Then under the bulleted points:
43
develop policy or I develop policy as Chancellor, that process of discussion, debate, reviewing evidence and analysis, might change your mind on something. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Over, you know, the many development processes that l've personally been involved with as Chancellor, it might well be the case that you come to a question with an intuitive view of what you think is right and, over the course of a policy development process, going over the analysis, the evidence, hearing from people, that you think, "Ah, well, I did think that, but it's clear now, having reviewed everything, that that wasn't right", or "We should do it a different way". I think that's entirely normal -- particularly when you're dealing with something that is uncertain and unprecedented, it's not surprising that that happens, and I don't necessarily think that it is a bad thing. It shows that someone is engaging with the process and hearing from different people before you get to a final decision meeting in the right format, Covid-O, Covid-S, Cabinet, et cetera.

But I don't think it's necessarily, as I said, a bad thing that over the course of a process the Prime Minister would want to hear different points of view before coming to a final decision, and it may well be that, you know, during the -- as I said, during that 42
"Clearly there is a high risk that this unwinds/is unpicked over Friday/Weekend."

So two questions, please, Mr Sunak. Firstly, the reference to the fact that there was a huddle between yourself and the Prime Minister after the general debate appears to suggest that, with this Prime Minister, there was an ability to get the last word in, to meet with him and to be able to influence his ultimate decision.

Secondly, the reference to unwinding and unpicking a position which appears to have been agreed suggests that this wasn't an open-ended debate which led to a consistent decision; there was the ability to be able to unwind or unpick a position which had already been reached.

Do you agree with both those propositions or neither?
A. Obviously I didn't write the email --
Q. No.
A. -- so I don't know precisely what it refers to, and is it possible that I might have had a chat with the Prime Minister once a meeting wound up on my way back somewhere? Of course that's possible. You know, he might have said to me, "Mm, that was interesting, I'm thinking $X$ as a result of it". I don't think anything particularly wrong with that, right? I mean, I don't 44
recall a huddle or not, it might be just saying -- he might have been just giving me a sense of where his head was at at that particular moment in time. And again, I don't think there's anything particularly untoward about that, to be honest.

And as I've talked previously about decision-making processes and ultimately there would be a final decision taken at an appropriate forum, it might well be that there had been an iterative process leading up to that, but, again, I don't think in and of itself that that is necessarily a bad thing, and again I'm not entirely sure what this specifically refers to.
Q. You refer to the fact that there might be an issue as to where his head is at, where the Prime Minister has reached in terms of his thinking. I need to ask you, because of the evidence which has been given by his former Cabinet secretaries, his former chief adviser, his former director of communications, also by, privately, his Chief Scientific Adviser, that he had a tendency to back and veer, to bear the impression of the last person who sat with him in terms of the debates which were raging in Downing Street, and that this led to a degree of chaos or, to use Sir Patrick Vallance's words, operational inefficiency. Were you aware that his closest advisers had seemingly unanimously taken the 45
paper, someone checked and that was the last we heard of it. I think that would actually be far worse, quite frankly. So I'm -- it's good that there was debate about these things.

Now, you know, in terms of operational inefficiency, again, you know, there is no perfect amount of deliberation versus speed. That's a trade-off that only the Prime Minister can make. You know, again -- and it will be context-dependent, it will be decision-dependent, so it's hard to generalise what the right amount of deliberative time is. But as l've talked about the process, I don't think it's a problem that the Prime Minister gets advice from different people, mulls over it and tries out different arguments, assuming there is the time to do that, before coming to a final decision. I think it's a good thing that there was debate, because debate was required when you're dealing with consequences of the sort that we were.
Q. How often, if at all, Mr Sunak, did you leave Downing Street or leave Number 10 Downing Street after debating issues with the Prime Minister, perhaps in a bilateral or multilateral conversation, and been told that a decision had been reached or that his view was $X$ to find out later that his view had changed or that a decision had been unwound or unpicked? Can you recall 47
view that there was a lack of efficiency? The administration is described privately as "brutal and useless" or "criminally incompetent" or "operationally chaotic"? Was any of that known to you?
A. No, I don't think any of those comments were shared with me at the time.

You made a point, though, Mr Keith, as if debates raged. I don't think that that is necessarily a bad thing.
Q. No, indeed not.
A. I mean, these -- it's right that there was vigorous debate because these were incredibly consequential decisions for tens of millions of people, in all spheres. Whether it was health, whether it was education, whether it was economic, whether it was society, whether it was long-term impacts, these were incredibly big decisions the likes of which no Prime Minister had taken in decades, if ever, like this. So the fact that there was debate and that people were passionate about it and they had different points of view is, I think, (a) unsurprising and (b) good, because it would be worse if we were having this conversation and all the commentary was: well, there was no debate about any of this whatsoever, it was all just signed off, straightforward, someone put a piece of 46
any such instance of that happening over this particularly fraught period from March through to October?
A. I mean, I'm sure it did. I mean, you know, you make so many, many, many decisions over the course of two years, but I --
Q. Well, we know which decisions are the most important. We know the momentous decisions, Mr Sunak. Did he change his mind when you had been given to understand that he had reached a view on the decisions which you and his closest advisers were debating at such ferocious length?
A. Again, I think if you could be more specific. I mean, if we talk about the first -- there were many, many momentous decisions, right, so -- I mean, that's why this is an important piece of work, that is extensive. But let's -- we'll get in -- if we talk chronologically, the decisions around the first lockdown, no, I don't think that happened, because as -- I mean, we haven't gone into it yet and we haven't touched on the economic analysis, which I think we'll come to later --
Q. We will.
A. -- or I can talk about the economic context we're operating in. But, you know, my strong recollection of those few weeks in March was that advice was put to the 48
government, to the Prime Minister, from SAGE, and advice was followed, pretty much imminently, on the same day in most cases if not all cases, during that period. The advice changed from SAGE during that period, but the government -- when the advice changed, the government acted. The Prime Minister didn't say, "I'm going to do this and then I'm going to change". We were sitting there, we got the advice about when we should implement self-isolation, household isolation, originally not to close schools, not to ban mass events. Things changed particularly on 16 March. That's when the advice from SAGE changed considerably about the speed of implementation. But, again, the Prime Minister reacted, schools were closed on, I think -- you know, well, that was announced on the 18th because that was put before the committee at the time that -- and again, that was just acted on immediately, I think the same day. Both on the 16th and the 18th, I think the Prime Minister stood up the same day and announced those decisions. And again even up to about, I think, 19 March, the view from SAGE, the view from the Chief Medical Officer was that the existing measures that had been announced, if there was, in their words, $75 \%$ compliance, that they should do the trick. Right?

And, again, then it was clear that compliance maybe 49

I'm sure we will have a fulsome discussion on each of them --
Q. But I'm asking you just generally your impression as the Chancellor. Were you a Chancellor in an administration in which there was an absence of clear consistent decision-making following full and robust debate, or was it your impression that the decisions were being made properly, that there was a proper opportunity for everybody to have their say, and then the Prime Minister took decisions and stuck to them? Which is it?
A. So I can only answer for myself in terms of did everyone have the ability they wanted to feed in. Ultimately, because I'm not -- you know, I don't know the extent to which other Cabinet ministers felt that they were sufficiently included or fed in or met the Prime Minister. It's a question for them. I've been consistently clear for my part I did have that ability from the beginning and throughout to feed into decision-making and, as I said throughout, it's right that there was debate and -- discussion and debate. That's my general recollection. I don't think -- there weren't decisions that were made by fiat, I think there was good debate and discussion about decisions as we went.

And unfortunately we were just dealing with
wasn't high enough and further interventions had to be put in place. But my strong recollection in that period of all those decisions is that there wasn't a "we do one thing and then change our minds", it was just the government responding to the advice from their scientific advisers. The scientific advice changed and then the government obviously changed with it. But it wasn't -- not -- I think that's not -- again, that's what -- that's what the government did at that time, it followed the advice from the scientists and didn't change its mind.
Q. May we take it, because you've referred to the first lockdown decision by way of your answer, that the same position took place -- the same position was reached in relation to the later decisions, for example roadmaps and easements, circuit-breakers, package A, tiers and so on and so forth? Are you saying that there was a consistent clear position adopted by Downing Street after the debate that obviously took place, and decisions weren't made which were then unpicked, or that there was a consistent approach adopted?
A. I mean --
Q. For those later periods.
A. I think -- I mean, you just named, I think, almost six different decisions, all of which probably merit, and 50
an unpredictable situation which people hadn't experienced before. And so did things have to iterate as we went along? Of course they did. And we'll get into that I'm sure when we address each of those individual decisions that you've mentioned.

Now, in each of those, of course, there would have been a period of iteration where we adjust the circumstances or facts as they changed. I don't think that is wrong. And I think it's hard to generalise, you know, but what we should do is go into each of those things in detail, as I look forward to doing, and I'm sure we will over the course of today.
Q. We will.

The first lockdown decision was taken on 23 March. In your statement, you relay, as you said this morning, your general impression that the recommendations which were being made in public health terms were strongly supported and there was a sense of the sooner the better that they were implemented, because the majority of the advice, indeed the vast majority of the advice that the government was receiving in those weeks of 9 and 16 March focused upon the public health considerations, the exponential nature of the growth curve, the damage that would be done and the ultimate collapse of the NHS, and of course on the number of deaths, the mortality 52

## that would ensue.

Can you recall, Mr Sunak, your take on and your recollection of the robustness of the data underpinning the proposition that the NHS would collapse? It was obviously debated by you and others at the meeting on the Monday 23rd, it was debated at all the COBRs and the Cabinet meetings hitherto. What was the understanding that you had? Was it undoubtedly going to be the case that the NHS would collapse, or was it a case of: it's in peril, there are very grave concerns as to whether or not it will be overwhelmed or overtopped, but we've got to see to what extent surge capacity and the heroic efforts of the NHS itself could save the day? Where was the final line reached?
A. I can't -- I can't specifically recall the analysis that was presented. I don't know, my overall recollections of this period, which may be helpful for this context, were obviously we were starting to get information coming in about Covid internationally. The general response was being led by DH. I think you will be familiar with the "contain, delay" strategy, which is what we were advised by the scientific experts to follow. The strategy was, as you said, to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed. You know, I vividly recall at the time the Chief Scientific Adviser saying,
case and obviously subsequent measures were implemented.
I don't remember the specific analysis that we were shown about the NHS being overwhelmed. I don't think I would have been in any position to challenge it --
Q. No.
A. -- and it was coming from the NHS at that moment.
Q. How much of the debate on that Monday revolved an understanding of what the impact on the NHS might be? Because the reason I ask, so you can understand the genesis of the question, Prime Minister, is that there was a great deal of information about beds and ICU beds --
A. Yes.
Q. -- and the number of beds and so on, and how many would be needed and whether they'd be overwhelmed and so on. But there was also a fair amount of information from the NHS as to what could be done by way of additional surge capacity, whether the NHS would survive, whether it could survive. And given that ultimately the decision to lock down rested at least in part on what the impact on the NHS would be likely to be if that decision were not taken, we need to know to what extent the actuality of the impact on the NHS was debated. Was it taken as said that there would be a collapse and therefore you had to act? Was there a detailed debate about the
you know, and I think it's recorded in the minutes, that, you know, the strategy was not to completely suppress the disease. Right? Which I think there was a misunderstanding about this. But that -- he was very explicit that that wouldn't work and that would just lead to a later second -- a second peak later in the year which did overwhelm the NHS. So what they wanted to do was flatten the curve, change the epidemiological shape and -- and they were very concerned about going too early. Right? The general advice from them was they were worried about implementing these things too early. They said that in private but also -- in private in the meetings but also in public in the press conferences.

But you're right, increasingly it became -- well, the advice we were getting was the NHS was imminently in danger of being overwhelmed, incrementally more and more measures were implemented. New modelling came out I think around the 16th which changed the timing that SAGE had worked to previously. Government acted on that, acted again on the 18th, and, as I said, I think Chris Whitty on about the 19th was clear that the decisions we'd made, having closed schools at that point, or announced, so if there was good compliance should be sufficient. That turned out not to be the 54
reality of the NHS and whether or not in fact an alternative position could be taken which wouldn't inevitably lead to the collapse of the NHS?
A. So I can't specifically recall. You're absolutely right there was a lot of talk about ICUs and monitoring of ICUs, what was happening, and then you had the forecasts from the scientific advisers with degrees of infection and hospitalisation.
Q. Indeed.
A. And then as far as I can remember, but I might be confusing it with a later period, you could easily plot the curves of, "Look, here's a line of NHS capacity, here's the predicted admissions" --
Q. There were curves then.
A. And look, what -- of course you would look to see, well, you know, how could we improve capacity through the Nightingales or flexing staff in ratios, all these types of things which we did. I don't think I was in a particular position or I don't remember there being enormous challenge of those assumptions that we were presented with the NHS. I'll be honest though, I can't precisely recall, but I think it was just -- it was presumably -- I think it was largely taken if they were saying we were going to be overwhelmed in a matter of days or weeks if this carries on this projected curve, 56
you know, it wasn't -- there wasn't an enormous amount of disagreement with that. Regardless, we should do everything we can to increase capacity, and I think we did, investing in Nightingales in particular. And changing staffing ratios was the other thing that helped, but I don't -- I don't precisely, as I say, recall the data that was presented in the debate that was had around it.
Q. All right.
A. But you are right that that was what was driving --
Q. Of course.
A. -- everything. So, as I said, it was not a total suppression, and I think this is where this issue of herd immunity came out --
Q. I'm sorry to interrupt. Can we address herd immunity and the other strategic or conceptual issues separately.
A. Sure.
Q. Finally on this question of the NHS, in hindsight, Prime Minister, and you've looked back at the documentation from that weekend, of course, and on the Monday and the COBR meeting on the Monday at 5 pm and the Cabinet meeting which took place afterwards, after the public announcement on the Tuesday, are you surprised by a relative absence of hard data as to the direct impact on the NHS and on the amount of debate 57
reflection, look, I agree, data was not as good as it could have been at the beginning. I think that improved over time and would be a big lessons learned for me.

To your broader point about: was there enough attention (inaudible) on this? You know, this was all happening very quickly. As the advice was coming in from the people at SAGE, it was essentially just acted on. On the -- you know, I think on the 12th, on the 16 th, on the 18 th, on the 20 th and the 23 rd.

Sorry, I know you're referring to days and I think about it as dates in my head, so if you could translate your Mondays and Sundays into dates, it would help me. But those are the key dates that I remember and the key meetings. I think either -- the 16 th is when the advice changed about the timing of implementation. Government I think made announcement same day. 18th again --
Q. Indeed.
A. -- conversation about London --
Q. Will you forgive me if I --
A. Sorry.
Q. Because we're going to be looking at it after the break in a bit more detail.
A. Oh, okay.
Q. I didn't suggest to you that the data was not as it could have been at the beginning, to which you lent your 59
which was directed towards working out what really would happen to the NHS if, by contrast to taking that further ultimate step on the Monday, the government had simply waited to see whether or not the measures imposed in good faith the previous week should be given more time to work?
A. So one of my more general reflections on this whole thing but particularly on this period as well is about data and access to good data. I think it's very clear that early on there just wasn't the quality and timeliness of the data, in all areas that you would have liked, in order to make decisions, but I think that's clear.

Now, that improved over time, I think. So the good news is I'd like to believe if this happened again actually we now know the data that we need and are able to get it, in terms of monitoring the progression of the virus or what's happening in the economy or the testing, all these things, including the NHS. You know, do I think at this moment in time the data was perfect? I doubt it was. I can't remember it precisely. I would assume it will be much improved today compared to as it was then, about our ability to know exactly what was happening in various hospitals.

To your broader -- so I think -- or a general 58
assent by saying "I agree". There was obviously data before you and your colleagues from the NHS sitreps, which were daily, there was data in relation to the number of beds, the number of ICU beds and so on. There was data in relation to the infection fatality rates, the hospitalisation rate and so on. The broad position was plain as a pikestaff: you knew what the position was in the NHS and you knew what the position was in terms of hospitalisation and fatality rates.

My question to you is: are you surprised at the relative absence of debate in those final ultimate decision-making meetings as to what really would happen to the NHS if you decided not to impose a mandatory stay-at-home order?
A. I mean, I -- you know, as I remember it -- I think, actually, you have to remember there were all these scenes -- what people talked about a lot was Lombardy. Right? I think people could -- it was in Italy, that region of Italy, there were these scenes at the hospital being overwhelmed, and I think that was very much in people's consciousness at the time, was the scenes from Lombardy, what happened in Lombardy, and needing to avoid that happening in the UK. So I think that was the kind of emotional backdrop to these conversations.

And you're absolutely right, of course the NHS 60
presented all the data on ICU and all that, and it was based on the combination of the scientific modelling of what was going to happen to hospital admissions and the NHS saying: well, obviously if you have admissions up here and capacity down here that's a pretty poor outcome for everybody. I don't remember the degree of scrutiny over those assumptions, of saying, "No", or, "You guys are just being very conservative, clearly you can treat five times as many people as you think". I don't remember those precise conversations. They may well have happened.

I wouldn't have any particular ability to challenge
them, I don't think. You know, if the medic of -- the
Chief Medical Officer and the head of the NHS are telling you, "This is the amount of staff we've got, this is how many are going to be off sick themselves, this is the maximum number of people or the ratio we can have of ICU nurses to a bed, even if we flex it", it's probably hard for me to say, "Well, you're wrong". Right? I mean, I could probably say "Well, they've done this over here" or "done this over there", but, again, this is not my lane, so to speak. But ...
Q. This was, of course, one of the most momentous decisions in the history of this nation. A great deal of water has passed under the bridge, the decision taken at that 61
first lockdown decision.
You referred earlier to the debate about
herd immunity and also the advice that the government received to the effect that implementation of the measures, plural, should not be undertaken too early.

A great deal of evidence has been received about the nature of the debate about herd immunity, the danger of suppression, which might lead to an uncoiled spring, and the issue of the timing of measures which then led into the wider debate about behavioural fatigue. You'll recall all these debates.

What should the Inquiry make of those debates? To what extent did they occupy valuable time and bandwidth in the weeks of 2 and 9 March? Do you recall there being a great deal of time spent on debating these somewhat conceptual issues?
A. You know, I don't precisely. I think I was probably a receiver, as it were, of information on that topic. The Department of Health were the ones who were the lead department presenting the information.

The Delay, Contain strategy was one that, to the best of my knowledge, had been signed off by our scientific health advisers. That's what we were told, I think, at Cabinet, so I had no reason to particularly doubt it.

5 pm meeting --
A. When you say the 5 pm meeting, what date?
Q. Monday 23 March, the decision to impose a mandatory stay-at-home order followed by the Prime Ministerial announcement, and then the Cabinet meeting the following day. It all revolved around that decision. My suggestion to you is that debate just didn't take place or, if it did, it didn't take place to the degree to which it should?
A. You know I can't remember precisely recall that particular meeting but, as I said, the track record of all those meetings, 16th, 18th, 19th -- or 20th and 23rd, was the government following the scientific advice that was put in front of it about the right NPIs to implement and at what time, based on -- based on protecting the NHS, as you said.
MR KEITH: Thank you.
My Lady, is that a convenient moment?
LADY HALLETT: Certainly. We'll break til 12.05 . (11.51 am)
Q. Yes, that was a document that was published on 3 March. It had its genesis in a commissioning email from the Secretary of State on 10 February. I'm more concerned with the weeks leading up to those --
A. You mean after --
Q. -- decision --
A. Yeah.
Q. -- the decision to implement the measures of the 12th, 16th and then 20 March.
A. I don't think the overall strategy changed. I think it always was the strategy, which was to not completely suppress the curve but to flatten the peak and push it out. I do remember this concept -- you know, I don't have any strong recollections, but I remember the Chief Scientific Adviser talking about herd immunity in that context. And I think the minutes of one of the meetings in -- I think maybe it is on the 12th, to your point, where I think the minutes say that he said a good outcome being that by September 2020 herd immunity would be reached. So that's in the --
Q. That's the reference to herd immunity. In fact I was --
A. That's in the minutes of that meeting --
Q. It is.
A. -- attributed to him. But I think it was just to get the point across that the aim and the goal could not be 64
and should not be to completely suppress the virus, it was about changing the shape of the curve. And all these interventions I saw as -- viz our previous conversation at the end of the last session, were about doing that so that the NHS was not overwhelmed.
Q. There were a number of SAGE meetings and COBR meetings where the issue of "Don't go too early" --
A. Yes.
Q. -- "timing is vital", dominated the debate --
A. Yes.
Q. -- at least the debate about whether or not measures should be implemented.

You were, of course, present at the COBRs. To what extent do you assess that, had the government not received advice, "Don't go too early, there is a limit to which the population will be able to countenance and to deal with such measures", to what extent did that debate slow down the ultimate decision-making?
A. My strong recollection from this period is that the government acted, I think, almost immediately on the recommendations from SAGE.
Q. Well, SAGE didn't, with respect, make specific suggestions, it could only recommend that more stringent interventions would be applied, and then they would produce papers showing what the consequences would be of 65
approach over that weekend.
A. I think the 16 th is the meeting I remember, which is where -- and I think the Imperial modelling had come out at around the same time. SAGE themselves said at that moment in time, and it's recorded in the minutes, that their view had changed just in the past few days.

So, look --
Q. That's what you recall?
A. Yes. You know, in those mid-teens days something changed. I do remember it was the Imperial modelling that had come out at around the same time, which no doubt was a factor but again you'd have to ask them. And then on the 16th that's when they said, "We need to do these things sooner than we thought, do them now". And I think the Prime Minister announced them that day.
Q. He did. There was a suite of measures on the 16th, and then of course decision taken on the 18th to close schools, and then on the 20th you'll recall vividly --
A. Yes.
Q. -- the decision that non-essential retail and so on should shut. But the fact that you, as Chancellor, recall the debate about the warning, and I don't mean that in any pejorative sense, the debate about the potential impact of going too early rather suggests that it was an important issue and that it would be prone, it 67
any particular intervention
A. But they also advised on timing.
Q. They did --
A. And so -- both on substance and timing. So I think on 9 March, from memory, I have to check, was the meeting where they said, "Look, here are three things that we think you're going to need to do, but we don't think you need to implement even the first one until later in the month, and here are three things that you definitely don't need to think about now, including banning mass events or closing schools". So that was a meeting I remember vividly.

Now, that was on the 9th, I think --
Q. That was the week of 9 March, yes
A. Then what happened -- on what -- then they came back with timing advice, which on the 12th was more specific, and the timing advice on the 12th said you don't need to implement the first of these until, I think, the 20th, and the other two later. Then that all changed on the 16th.
Q. Well, there was a 13th SAGE where they said don't allow a concern about the timing of implementation to delay anything you might wish to do. So there was a change on the 13th in terms of material from SAGE and the evidence is quite clearly that there were dramatic changes in the 66
would be likely to have had an impact on the decision-making process?
A. I think we were following the advice from the scientists, so --
Q. All right.
A. I do agree that we were influenced and informed by what they were telling the government to do and when to do it, and they definitely early on, as you've mentioned, they talked a lot about timing and not going "too early", in their words, in the press conferences and with us in meetings.
Q. On Thursday 19 March, WhatsApps between Mr Cummings and Mr Cain show that there was an emergency or at least a debate that had to take place in front of the Prime Minister concerning the fear that the bond market or l.suppose. the gilts market, as we would call it, might collapse, or at least a concern as to the extent to which the government might be able to fund itself.

Just so that we can get the chronological picture correct, did you go and debate or speak to the Prime Minister that Thursday in relation to your concerns about funding because there had been, or as there was shortly to be, a placing of debt in the marketplace that failed? So there was --
A. Yeah.
Q. -- a real problem on that Thursday
A. Yes. Now, I don't recall the precise timing and the date when I was speaking to the Prime Minister on these issues, but you'll have a record of it, but the key moments were I received advice on the 19th --
Q. Thursday?
A. Yes. Which -- and the reason for that was the day before there was a very significant move in gilt rates. So the cost of our borrowing, to put it in ordinary language. And there had been a move across most developed markets, bond markets, but the move in the UK was outsize relative to our peers, and that was obviously concerning. So that was global investment community starting to take a different view on the UK Government's ability to borrow or the price that we should pay for that. And the cost of our borrowing at that point had tripled in a matter of probably about a week.
Q. So it was a very major problem --
A. So that was -- and there are some other things that are technical, but led the Treasury and the advice I was getting to tell me that there was -- the gilt markets were showing some signs of impaired functioning. So that was all -- that was what was happening on the 18th and the 19th.
and we couldn't raise the money we needed. That is an extremely serious and rare event, and it happened once before in the financial crisis, and it unsurprisingly caused enormous anxiety inside the Treasury and with me, because it was a very worrying development.

Subsequent to that, the government had to enter into, I think what you were referring to, Mr Keith, which was something called the Ways and Means facility, which again, in ordinary parlance, is an overdraft facility at the Bank of England. It's the government saying: we're not sure if we're going to be able to borrow the money that we need and fund ourselves so we will open up essentially an overdraft at the Bank of England, and if need be they will just fund us.

Which is, again, almost unprecedented, it happened once before in the crisis, and it is a strong evidence of the extreme stress that we were under from a financing perspective.

Sorry to explain, but I think it's important for understanding the context that I was operating in and that's what I would have, over the course of those few days, no doubt have explained to the Prime Minister.
Q. And what did you understand to have been the impact of you telling the Prime Minister about your concerns? So
Q. Indeed.
A. And then something else happened on the 21st.
Q. I don't want to go into the detail of it, would you just confirm that, of course, the government put arrangements into place to ensure additional liquidity. In the event they weren't used, but the government was on top of the problem. And you raised this problem with the Prime Minister on the Thursday --
A. Yeah.
Q. -- in the context of the decision-making which was then going on as to whether or not London should be locked down first, and you were concerned in any final decision the Prime Minister understood that the bond market, the gilt market, was a consideration; is that a fair --
A. Yes. So I think it's worth, if you don't mind, me just spending a minute on it, because I do think it's important for the context of the time, because it was incredibly worrying to me as Chancellor.

What happened on the 21st is that we had a failed gilt auction. So what does that --
Q. Is this the BMO operation?
A. Yes. What that means is the government, in order to fund itself and pay for all the things that we need, borrows in the markets, and on that day, when we tried to borrow from people, the auction didn't go as planned 70
in the context of the debate which was running on, of course, during those days as to the extent to which further measures would need to be imposed and, of course, ultimately whether there should be a lockdown decision, what impact did your concerns about the gilt or the bond market and the government's ability to fund itself have on that decision-making process?

And I ask, and so that you are clear, there is some suggestion that there was on that Thursday mooted the possibility of locking down London in advance of the rest of the country. We want to know to what extent that decision was influenced by the concerns about government borrowing.
A. Probably a question for the previous Prime Minister, really, because he would have been hearing lots of different things from lots of different --
Q. But you must have expressed a view on it to the Prime Minister when you spoke to him on the Thursday?
A. I don't recall other than explaining to him the stress that we were under, and it was a relevant consideration for him. That's why he had an impossible job, in many ways, to balance all these very difficult things.

But with regard to London specifically, I recollect that meeting and I recollect that the priority intervention that had been recommended, suggested by 72

SAGE, was to close schools. And we did that. The Prime Minister announced that I think on the same day as the meeting, on the 18th, not just in London but nationally.
Q. Yes.
A. So in terms of the substantive, "Here are the set of options for London", the one in the papers that would, it says, would be most effective was closing schools, that was announced the same day by the Prime Minister, acted on.
Q. What debate did you have with the Prime Minister about whether or not locking London was an advisable step to take in light of your concerns about the gilt market?
A. I don't recall a specific meeting or conversation about those two things. I think more generally, as I've said, my job was to provide him with best economic evidence, advice, analysis, and it was a relevant consideration for him that there was this situation in the gilt markets. It was right that he was aware of that.

And of course, with regard to London, we took the advice of SAGE and closed schools not just in London but across the entire country on the same day that that advice came to the committee.
Q. Yes. The decision was then announced on the 18 th to take effect from the 20th?

73
grappling with today. Economic scarring is the long-term impact on the economy from things that happen in the short term.

Again, I won't go over it in great detail but
I think, you know, it's clear that, as a result of what was happening that over -- you know, the economy was being impacted, jobs would be impacted, which is crucial for people's livelihoods, businesses would be impaired. And because of the borrowing that was necessary, that would have an impact on future tax levels.

In summary -- those are high level, I'm happy to elaborate if you need, but they're covered my witness statement.
LADY HALLETT: Mr Sunak, just to reassure you and others,
I don't just take into account your oral evidence but I do, before reaching any conclusions, take into account everything you've said in writing. So don't worry, it will all be considered.
MR KEITH: And to be plain, I've asked you because it's important that the public understand that you have attempted to set out in your witness statement some of the overarching consequences of the major first lockdown decision --
A. If I might, Mr Keith, people can see it, I think it's important -- and this is always tricky in public policy,
A. On the 20th, that's correct.
Q. In your statement, so that we can understand, and it's a matter of obviously huge public interest, we can understand the nature of the impact of the lockdown decision, have you set out -- and we'll have your statement at page 53, at paragraphs 182 to 187 -- the scale of the economic and social impact of the pandemic restrictions?

Mr Sunak, l'm going to respectfully ask you to try to keep your answers as concise as you can. Perhaps you might just agree with the following proposition: do you set out in those paragraphs the damage that was done in terms of the impact on GDP, the damage on the economy, the government's borrowing, the costs of course, the fiscal impact, and the scarring, that is to say the long-term damage that was done to the economy through alterations in labour supply and the like?

So you've attempted to set out in very broad terms what the lockdown decision did?
A. Yes, and my witness statement contains a summary of the various economic impacts, as you highlighted. Biggest fall in GDP was predicted, in hundreds of years, borrowing reaching World War II levels. The impact that that would have obviously on the labour market, unemployment and tax levels, which obviously we're 74
is many of these impacts are not felt immediately, they're felt over time. And that is always a tough thing to deal with when you're communicating. But, you know, as it turned out, we were able to borrow what we needed to fund the pandemic response. The impact of having to pay it back only comes well after the fact when everyone can -- you know, everyone forgets why it was necessary and now everyone is grappling with the consequences -- I am grappling with the consequences of that as we have a historically high -- you know, a tax burden that is higher than I would like. That is a direct consequence of the support that was provided during the pandemic and then later on.

But, as I said, those things were often hard to get across, but they're all contained in the statement.
Q. Let's please not go on to the issue of tax burdens.

There are two issues to which you pay particular attention in your statement following the lockdown in March and April 2020, Mr Sunak. The first is that HMT expressed concern that there had been overcompliance with the government's stay-at-home messaging during the first lockdown. Essentially you were concerned and your department was concerned that the public hadn't understood sufficiently clearly from the government's communications that they should go to work only if they 76

could not work from home, and that the messaging perhaps had -- the nuance of that position had been lost in the overall messaging "Stay at home to help us save lives".

What did the Exchequer do about that? Was there any means open to you to try to change the messaging or to try to ensure that people did go to work where they permissibly and legally could do so?
A. You're right in summarising the situation. Perhaps the best example of it is in the construction industry, which, because it was by its nature outdoors, and we'd seen what had happened in other European countries, more activity was able to be continued in Europe than was the case in the UK. I would say that was a good example of the messaging being slightly lost.

I don't think there was anything that we could do about it particularly. It was a relevant point when we came to the exit roadmap in the May plan and trying to get that messaging right. And it -- because the scientific advice and the modelling was predicated on a -- you know, an amount of people who were working from home and an amount of people who were at work, and what ended up happening is those assumptions were essentially undershot and fewer people were out at work than had been anticipated.
Q. Indeed.

77
modelling has been given, and then a reference to the timing of any decision.

If you could go forward, please, to page 4, we will see this specifically following up on NPI commission, non-pharmaceutical intervention commission:
"I know you are already working on a paper updating [the Chancellor] on the economic impact of NPIs ..."

There is going to be a wider Cabinet discussion.
And then this at 3b, Prime Minister:
"... I propose the following as a ... next step:
"... [a] Paper that we can share with the [Prime
Minister] ahead of [the bilateral] (opportunity for [the
Chancellor] to set out his views and the economic analysis to the PM, without it being watered down by the [Cabinet Office] process)."

Do you know what that is a reference to, the "watered down by the [Cabinet Office] process"? Because plainly you, as the Chancellor, are absolutely entitled, you suggested it yourself, perhaps constitutionally obligated, to bring the economic angle to bear in front of the Prime Minister, without it being "watered down" by any other part of government. So what is that a reference to, do you think?
A. Obviously I didn't write the email so it's hard for me to comment. And if you flick back to the earlier bit of

Could I ask you, please, also just to slow down a little bit, when you give your answers, Prime Minister. There is a record, of course, being kept by our stenographer.

If we could just look at INQ000236583.
It's an email, again, from your principal private secretary in the Treasury to various recipients, and as you rightly say -- this is in fact dated April, but it's on the cusp of the debate about the recovery plan, so, as you say, the debate about coming out of the lockdown.

The email says:
"... [the Chancellor] is considering the paper for the Cabinet Office process ...
"Quick readout of the discussion in the meeting this afternoon ..."

Then obviously references to your position in relation to the various issues which are being debated within the Treasury: how difficult it is to argue that the NPIs should be lifted while the number of cases and deaths are still rising, but that you were broadly supportive of the strategy that encourages return behaviour back to the economy.

Then there is a reference to economic groups starting to model, and your wish that you have very clearly in mind the exact timetable of what advice on 78
the email, I think -- actually, as you can see from that, it clearly mentions a Cabinet Office process --
Q. Yes.
A. -- which is right and appropriate, but also, even when it talks about modelling on sectors, to bring that together with the CMO thinking on the health impacts. I think even in that email you can see -- as I said, I didn't write it, so I'm not sure entirely what it's referring to, but it's clear that there is a Cabinet Office process that we are feeding into, the CMO is feeding in, and that's the right way for the Prime Minister to receive.
Q. There's no suggestion that there shouldn't be a process, there has to be a process, the Cabinet Office will synthesise to some extent what is contributed by other government departments, but these are the most senior officials in your department talking about your position and your thoughts and what should be done in advance of a bilateral, and it refers to a concern that your voice might be watered down by the Cabinet Office, and therefore that must have been something of which you were aware, if only in the most general terms?
A. I think as I've said previously, I never felt that I didn't have an opportunity to feed in what I wanted to the Prime Minister. And again, I didn't write the 80
email. I'm not sure how officials may have felt in their conversations with other departments or the Cabinet Office. I generally thought we had good constructive relations and, for my part, I felt I always had the opportunity to feed into the Prime Minister's thinking.
Q. All right.

A second noteworthy debate was taking place, before we look at the detail of the roadmap, you expressed concern in May, in fact at a 9.15 meeting on 14 May, that international polling had suggested that the British people were more fearful of the virus than other countries, and in the Spectator article to which I've already referred you, you state that -- well, you say this, it's quoted:
"'In every brief, we tried to say: let's stop the
"fear" narrative. It was always wrong from the beginning. I constantly said it was wrong.'"

What was that about? What was your concern about the general response of the British people?
A. Again, from an economic perspective, we are a consumption-driven economy, and therefore people's jobs and livelihoods and our ability to pay for public service is a function of consumption being strong, and if you have a situation like this where we've actively 81
a country.
Q. All right.
A. So that was their concern.
Q. The clock is ticking, I'm going to ask you to try to just be a little more concise, if you wouldn't mind, Prime Minister.

On the subject of the obvious understanding of the needs of those in part-time work, the vulnerable, the young, female employees, members of the black and minority ethnic sector, your statement makes it plain that if not at the forefront certainly a major part of the Exchequer's thinking throughout the pandemic was the need to ensure that their interests were not forgotten and that as much should be done as possible, and ought to be done as possible, in terms of trying to get the consumer sector back to life, to safeguard their position.

And we'll just have a quick look where you've summarised the position. It's your statement, INQ000232069, and the interventions are at page 26.

Sorry, it's not 232069, it's your witness statement, page 26:
"In ... briefings and papers that were circulated before meetings, there was often reference to and consideration of [the] equalities impact ..."
discouraged or shut down consumption sectors from operating, once they re-open it was a point of concern for me and for anyone thinking about the economy, and those jobs, as to the pace of return, of people returning to normal activity over time. Because if they didn't, then that would have significant implications for many people's jobs.

And those sectors of the economy, and this is a really important point, that were most impacted by lockdown, these consumption sectors, hospitality, leisure, tourism, retail, disproportionately employed people who were the most vulnerable in society, those on the lowest incomes, people coming off welfare, women, ethnic minorities, those working part-time. So those jobs, I think as a matter of social justice, were particularly important to try to safeguard, and polling was clear -- I can't remember the exact polling firm, but there was international polling --
Q. Ipsos.
A. Ipsos -- that demonstrated there seemed to be, or there was a much greater reticence for people in the UK to want to return back to all those activities, even once things had been re-opened, and that was -- that would have genuine impacts on people's lives and their jobs, and our -- and everything else that we'd want to do as 82

You received equality impact assessments in relation to HMT policies.

Then if we scroll back out, paragraph 82, you were obviously aware:
"... from an early stage that less well-off households were 'particularly vulnerable to the economic shock' ..."

How could you not, of course, be aware?
And consideration was therefore purposefully given to at-risk and other vulnerable groups in your economic decision-making.

So that's clear. I think at paragraph 83 you also refer to Long Covid. Do you recall at what time Long Covid presented itself on the Exchequer's horizon?
A. I don't specifically. I recall in the May plan having a conversation with the CMO about including in that document consideration of other health impacts, beyond the immediate Covid impacts, and I think there's some language in the May plan that talks about the various other health impacts at that point, as something I was keen to stress that was a consequence of all of this that we should understand. I don't remember specifically.
Q. All right.

On account of, as you rightly say, the need to 84
ensure that the retail and hospitality sectors could be brought back to life as soon as reasonably possible, the Treasury pushed, indeed, for the sector to be opened ahead of schools. That was the original position of HMT, was it not?
A. I think, if I recall --
Q. It was ultimately what happened, but I think that was the Exchequer's position?
A. If I recall it correctly when I was having these deliberations or participating in them in May, there's a letter I sent to the Prime Minister that contains it, non-essential retail -- I think you'll have the exhibit --
Q. Yes.
A. -- which may be helpful. I talk about non-essential retail because of the economic -- the jobs, you know, there are millions of jobs and particularly the type of people in those jobs. But also, as we later discovered and was my sense during, SAGE themselves later said that non-essential retail had a very minimal impact on $R$. That was what all the evidence concluded, that it was very minimal impact on $R$.
And now, with regard to schools, I said in that May thing they should be opened, particularly the early years, alongside or immediately after non-essential
our roadmap", dated May, paragraph 17:
"We must then continue with our plan to return early years, reception and years 1 and 6 to school."

That is, continuing after the opening of non-essential retail.

Can you recall why or how the final position was reached, the order of play in which schools and non-essential retail opened? Do you recall how that debate was resolved?
A. No, not particularly. I think you said previously, Mr Keith, that hospitality was before schools, which is -- as you said there, it's not, it was retail and education pretty much together, one after another, and hospitality later.
Q. That was the position that was reached, yes.
A. But that was also what I -- that email said.
Q. Right, non-essential --
A. The one that you had previously popped up also had hospitality in July, and schools and retail before then.
Q. You called in the -- well, according to the email from your principal private secretary dated 4 May, she says:
"... open sectors now ..."
Then:
"... schools early June, and non-essential between the two ..."

85
retail, and before hospitality, because I cared very much on the impact on children and their educational attainment and development, and that letter talks about those things.

So retail because of the jobs and because it had minimal impact. Immediately alongside that, particularly the early years, education, of schools and nurseries. And it was only after that, hospitality. So that was the sequencing in the letter I wrote in May.
Q. Indeed.

If we have INQ000236585, it's an email from your principal private secretary to various recipients, and on the first page there is a reference to the Chancellor focusing in -- perhaps it's on page 2 , yes, the second bullet point:
"Therefore need hospitality open in the Summer (July), and to his this and to stage things....this means open sectors now, schools early June, and non-essential between the two (mid may)."

So certainly at the beginning of May, and this is dated I think 4 May, the proposal from the Treasury is: we've got to get hospitality and particularly non-essential open, and then schools will follow.

And there's another letter, an email, INQ000232085, paragraph 17 on page 2, this is your letter "Delivering 86

So open sectors now, then non-essential, then schools. But --
A. It says hospitality thereafter. It says hospitality -yeah, I don't have it in front of me, but it had hospitality in July --
Q. Let's have a look, INQ000236585.

LADY HALLETT: On my reading of it, if you look at the months, I don't think the "between the two" makes sense.
A. I mean, I think if -- I mean, as you -- if you have the second page up --
MR KEITH: Yes, it's the second page --
A. -- I think it said "need hospitality open in Summer (July)".
Q. "... this means open sectors now, schools early June, and non-essential between the two (mid may)."

So non-essential is coming in before schools, that's the --
A. Yes, just a couple of weeks, but what you'd said, that hospitality was also coming in, I just want to reiterate that was never the case.
LADY HALLETT: "Between the two" doesn't make sense, it's first.
A. It was retail --

MR KEITH: This was your policy, Prime Minister.
A. Well, I would say -- well, all I'm saying is the point 88
was to do retail and schools a couple of weeks apart, in May/June. Hospitality was always summer because it was the last thing. Retail because, as you see from the letter that you had up in May, the jobs and people particularly employed in those jobs, again people who were more vulnerable work in retail, on lower incomes, and actually those jobs therefore have, I think, a broader social purpose or benefit as well as the job itself.

And in schools, as far as I remember it, again not my -- obviously my particular responsibility, there was actually a real concern that it would be very difficult to get schools to come back, and I would imagine you've taken evidence on that point. But my recollection was that there was quite a lot of resistance from the sector about schools coming back. I think there was -- parents were also concerned, and there was an issue that many schoolteachers were themselves either isolating or impacted and actually it would be very difficult to have schools open in full --
Q. All right, so all that was part of the mix --
A. That was part of the mix --
Q. I'd suggest that this wasn't exactly how it panned out, but it was quite clear that consideration was given to these various competing factors and reasons why schools 89
referred to international comparative data, in essence
how other European countries were showing, you said, how re-opening the economy can be done.

Can we just look very briefly at the issue of comparative data.

Did the Treasury, throughout the whole crisis, refer repeatedly, of course, to what other countries were doing, what their data was demonstrating, what ultimate decisions they were taking in light of their own particular positions, and was that something that was at the forefront of the debate when these arguments came to be ventilated in front of the Prime Minister?
A. I think it's probably too much to say it was at the forefront but certainly right to say it was another piece of information which was helpful and useful to take into account, yes.
Q. All right.

On 28 April, so again around this time, you had a bilateral with the Prime Minister.

INQ000236584.
Again, this is a note from your principal private secretary referring to a bilateral on Tuesday, the subject matter is "PM [Bilateral] on Tuesday".

On the first page, there is a reference to the
Prime Minister's instinct -- we can see there in the 91
could only be opened when they were?
A. Again, that -- a question probably for the

Education Secretary and the Prime Minister. I would say from an economic perspective -- or the only input the Treasury would have into that deliberation or the Cabinet Office would be the labour market impact. And that's why, from a purely economic perspective, again it would be Education Secretary who would talk about children's attainment. Although I cared very much about that, as you can see from the letter I sent, and it's there, because I've long-stand had concerns about that.

But from an analytical perspective what, the Treasury could do is explain -- I mean, unsurprisingly -- if you open early years and children and -- primary school children, that has a disproportionate benefit on the labour market because it means their parents can return to work in a way that that doesn't -- you don't necessarily get that benefit from older students. But --
Q. All right. Around the same time, in fact on 7 May, you expressed to a Covid-S, Mr Sunak, your concern that unless the economy was re-opened at perhaps a somewhat faster speed than some other Cabinet ministers were advising, we would be at risk of placing the United Kingdom at a competitive disadvantage, and you 90
first bullet point -- being that:
"... we might have overdone lockdown; telling that no other countries closed construction (turned to our [international] slide) but said interesting that there are new opportunities coming out of this and online is growing."

And he also says -- a little further down the page -- that the "sooner get this open the better", but then refers to the risk of another exponential increase. And I think he says overall he's agitated that he didn't have a plan.

Yes. To what extent in these early days of the roadmap, Mr Sunak, was the Prime Minister concerned that -- concerned as to how he would equate the imperative of making sure that there be no unnecessary risk -- growth in prevalence, and the need to get the economy back going? It must have been a source of perpetual anxiety and you had these debates with him as to how he should resolve them.
A. Again, probably better addressed to him, but we recapped previously the economic impacts. By this point we had a much greater sense of what they were because we were -- I don't see the date of this email but I think it -- was it -- did you say May or end of April?
Q. Yes, it's the end of April, 28 April.

92
A. The government's independent forecaster, the OBR, had published their reference scenario, I think perhaps a week, ten days before this, so that would be in the public domain. It was pretty stark. I won't recap it all again but that was then all out there and we were collecting real-time data on the number of people that were furloughed, the businesses that were shut, et cetera, et cetera, so it would be unsurprising if that wasn't something that he was considering.
Q. There's an email from again the same Elizabeth Perelman on 21 May.

## INQ000232168.

This is an email which follows yet another meeting with the Prime Minister in which she says, I think probably on page 2 : economic advice to the [Prime Minister]/[Chancellor] ..." own homework there. But:
"... the Chancellor has not eloquently and authentically put these points across."

So there can be no question but that you've eloquently and authentically put these points across.
"But once again he was a lone voice and it was
sectors of the economy that were open or closed, but in hospitals or care homes, which requires a slightly obviously different response. Those weren't well understood issues earlier on but it was clear that they were stating to become issues. So those were the types of conversations that I was having at that moment in time.
Q. All right.

Do you recall in June how an HMT official who attended SAGE provided a read-out which referred to the fact that the CMO, Professor Sir Chris Whitty, and the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Sir Patrick Vallance, began to warn that the package of measures for re-opening, in particular the beginning of July, was at the riskier end of the spectrum and therefore had the potential to increase $R$ above 1? Do you recall that warning being relayed to you or to the Treasury at the end of June?
A. I don't. What I do recall, perhaps should have started with this, is this May plan -- I'd say two things about it. One is that it was conditional, so there were various tests that were set out to unlock each stage, and indeed it was delayed at one point, which shows, I think, the flexibility of decision-making and responsiveness to the health concerns. And --
"No one can say that HMT has not given gold standard

Perhaps there might be an element of marking one's 93
a tricky meeting, where sense was they were trying to appease him."

Do you recall what that is a reference to?
A. No.
Q. Was it, do you think, a reference to the fact that in this particular meeting you had argued for an opening up of the economy but the majority of the room had expressed its combined view that the risk of opening up too fast would have terrible consequences further down the road? Was that not the debate that was going on at the time?
A. I can't comment on the particular meeting because I don't recall it. In general, I was making the points at this time about the economic impact, what was happening internationally, the fact that we were investing in test and trace and the Joint Biosecurity Centre as new institutions that would allow us to manage an exit, and I was also concerned at this point in time about the data that we were receiving on transmission and admissions, and I think it was exactly around this time that it was clear that we had probably been overestimating R., that's something that SAGE themselves acknowledged a bit later, and also the issue of nosocomial transmission, where a large amount of the transmission that was happening was happening not in 94
Q. Step 2 was delayed from 1 to 15 June?
A. Yes. But I think it demonstrates the process working and the conditions working.

And the second, and perhaps most important thing to say, is, you know, the May plan was developed with scientific and epidemiological input, and it was modelled at SAGE in early May. I remember the CMO -and again this is recorded in the minutes of the Covid strategy meeting at the time -- saying that this package of measures should not push R above 1. I mean, that was my strong --
Q. What strategy meeting was that?
A. That was in the Covid strategy meeting, I think, in -I haven't got the exact date in front of me -- in May. I'm happy to send it -- it's in my witness statement.
Q. By June, Mr Sunak, wasn't the scientific evidence, the epidemiological evidence from SAGE and from the CMO and the GCSA that the measures which had been agreed, first proposed and then agreed, were at the riskier end of the spectrum? And I'm specifically asking you about the stage which had been reached by then, late June, which was step 3 . Were you not aware that the scientists were beginning to question the speed at which the roadmap was operating? Do you recall that being brought to your attention?

96
A. No. I think they always thought that, from the beginning. I think they thought it was consistent with R not being above 1 that -- I think from the beginning they thought it was -- you know, at that end of the spectrum, it was closer to 1 than it was to 0.1 , if I can put it that way. But they were involved and modelled the package of measures that were announced in May. I think that's important.
Q. They didn't. They didn't model the package, Mr Sunak, they gave advice through SAGE on what the consequences would be of the package, and then it was for the government, the Prime Minister in particular, to decide what consequences would flow from whatever he decided.
A. That's -- again, I don't have a perfect recollection, but I thought in the -- early in May, either on the 2nd or 5th, around that time, that SAGE had modelled the impact on R of the various measures under consideration, and at the meeting I think on the 6th the CMO and CSA, the minutes record, were broadly content.
Q. That was, I think, in relation to the broad roadmap, which was itself dated 13 May, and step 1 , which of course was the first step. The second step, which was 15 June, and the third step, of course, came later.

And by the end of June, 23 June, the CMO and the GCSA were warning that the package of measures was at 97
developed and hadn't changed, and I strongly recall it
being modelled in terms of the impact on $R$ and people broadly being comfortable that it did just about keep things at that level.

And I think the other thing, as I said, that was a relevant consideration at this time was that in June, probably actually three days before this email, the SAGE minutes record that there had been errors that meant that for some time they had been overestimating the rate of transmission, making it look artificially high.
Q. Well, there was an issue about hospital data, was there not?
A. Yeah, I mean, I think in the SAGE minutes from 20 June it's very clear that SAGE -- because there were errors in the data collection so it meant that all the numbers we were working off were artificially high. There was also a separate --
Q. You mean -- forgive me, just so that we don't lose track of where we're going --
A. Yes, but I think it's a relevant consideration --
Q. No, no, if you just bear with me.
A. Of course.
Q. In the same email, in the middle of the page, there's a bullet point which refers to that very issue:
"... NHS have looked in to the serious concerns 99
the riskier end of the spectrum, with the potential to increase R above 1.

Shall we have a look at INQ000232181.
It's a read-out of SAGE from your principal private secretary
"Vallance noted the heavy trailing in the press of the measures the govt has now announced it will relax; said he and Whitty had made clear to the policy makers that this package was at the riskier end of the spectrum (with the potential to increase R above 1), and that they needed to be prepared to re-impose measures if necessary. Noted also that this package reduces the space for doing other things, like bringing schools back in September. If schools are to return, policymakers may have to reimpose restrictions in other places like retail."

The government had obviously made the various decisions that it made in relation to the three steps and the roadmap, but by the end of June the Treasury was of course considering the voucher scheme that became Eat Out to Help Out. Was that not something that was being contemplated at the end of June, with a view to its implementation in August?
A. Yes, I mean, I don't recall seeing that email, so that didn't come to me. As I said, the exit plan was 98
raised by the modellers about the hospital admissions data, and claim it is causing no more than a $5 \%$ error in that data stream."

So there was a debate about the significance of the error and what its impact was, but the NHS appeared to say there was no more than a $5 \%$ error. But be that as it may, whatever the position was on the data, the CMO and the GCSA were raising a general alarm at the end of June about the risk that the transmission prevalence would go up and that the package which had already been agreed was itself already at the riskier end of the spectrum.

So the question for you is: to what extent did HMT understand at the end of June that whatever it proposed to do thereafter came with significant risk?
A. You know, I -- that's just not my recollection of it. I mean, my recollection was that we went over a set of things that could be done, it was conditional, it was delayed at one stage on the advice from the scientists. So I think that shows that the process was working. I think there were genuine issues about the robustness of the data, but also where the R was coming from, because there was this issue about nosocomial transmission that was definitely not properly understood at the time, potentially accounting for up to a quarter 100
of the transmission, which obviously requires a very different response. But also I think -- analysis has been done subsequent to this that I wasn't aware of at the time from professors of medicine and economics at Imperial and Manchester that applied a QALY analysis to the first lockdown and its duration. And their QALY analysis, which you'll be familiar with, is a tool of health, a public health analysis, suggested that the lockdown in its severity and duration is likely to have generated costs that are greater than the likely benefit. So I think --
Q. I mean, so -- I'm so sorry, I don't want to get into quality life assurance models.

Is it your position, as the Chancellor, that at the end of June you were unaware that the government's chief advisers, epidemiological, public health advisers, were making clear that the existing package was already at the riskier end of the spectrum, and therefore that, going forward, real care would have to be taken to ensure that that prevalence and the R rate going above 1 did not eventuate?
A. I was always clear that schools were something they viewed as a big risk factor, which I think is alluded to in that email.
Q. Did you know that the package in place was at the 101
consequences, otherwise she wouldn't have been writing to you in this term?
A. I just -- I didn't write this email --
Q. And you didn't see it, you think?
A. I rarely, if ever, saw these emails. That's just not something I would have done. Right? I would have been briefed here and there on things that I needed to know, but I definitely didn't see these emails on a regular basis, that's --
Q. Questions like risk and whether or not Treasury plans would have an impact upon prevalence and an increase in transmission and ultimately hospitalisation and death were obviously issues which were brought to your attention?
A. Yes, and my strong recollection is that the set of measures that were announced in the May plan was one which the scientists had fed in on, had modelled and was consistent with $R$ being at or below 1 , and on their advice one step of that plan was delayed for, I think, a fortnight in June, and there were measures that were continued with after this email, which rather suggests that there wasn't a significant concern raised, because when they had raised a concern previous to this the government acted on it with regard to delaying whichever step it was, step 2 or step 3 . So I think there is 103
riskier end of the spectrum epidemiologically?
A. I don't precisely remember that, but I do remember it was modelled and designed to keep $R$ at or below 1 .
Q. All right.
A. And, as I said, I'm sure it was closer to 1 than it was to 0.1 , but remember, as we've discussed in the first session, policymakers are taking into account a whole range of considerations and the objective strategy here was not to completely suppress the virus, it was to make sure that the NHS was not overwhelmed, that is consistent with a range of R ratios, so ...
Q. The point is well made. Ultimately the Prime Minister has to make the final decision and he'll take into account the risk, he'll take into account the economic and fiscal consequences. But the point here is that this demonstrates that the Treasury, because this is your principal private secretary, were told, rightly and responsibly, that there were alarm bells ringing about the package already in place, and therefore the Treasury could not have been unaware that whatever it proposed in the public interest, economically, going forward, came with risks.

I mean, there is no way which any responsible Treasury could consider implementing plans without having at least half an eye on the epidemiological 102
a track record of the government responding to the concerns that the scientists had and actively delaying a stage of the unlocking.
Q. All right.
A. So, I mean, that's all I can remember about that event --
Q. No, no, that's clear.

Can I squeeze in one further topic before the break, and it's this, and we can deal with it very shortly: your statement refers to the issue of PPE.
Prime Minister, that is, as you know, a matter for a later hearing, but you address the issue of PPE from a high-level Treasury perspective. Is this a fair summary of the position insofar as the Exchequer was concerned: plainly HMT involvement in the issue of PPE commenced right at the beginning, it commenced in March 2020; is that right?
A. Yes, I -- that is right.
Q. And whilst although at the beginning the Treasury was obligated to approve individual PPE contracts at the request of the DHSC, the Treasury had agreed to depart from the usual process and put into place a flexible spending control envelope. So the DHSC were given an envelope within which they could spend and within which they could enter into PPE contracts without having 104
to go to the Treasury or the chief secretary to the Treasury or you. And that funding envelope started I think at $£ 100$ million on 25 March but by 11 April it was $£ 1$ billion. Is that a fair summary of the envelope position?
A. Yes. It's probably worth me expanding on it.
Q. Well, only if you think that we'd be greatly assisted by it, given that there is another module looking at it, but it may or may not be the case you'll have to give evidence in that module and I'm trying to cover the possibility you might not, Mr Sunak, by asking you just to agree with my general proposition now.
A. I think that the first thing to say is I wasn't involved in it day-to-day because it was led by the chief secretary.
Q. Yes.
A. Generally we aim to move at pace given the urgency of the requirements and, as you suggested accurately, we put in place a new way of doing it so that rather than individual contracts being agreed as would be normal with the scrutiny that would come from that, HMT gave to the Department of Health a budget that it could spend. It raised that budget I think five different times, it ended up being close to $£ 14$ billion in the end, so that there would be no blocks and there would be speed of 105
Q. And they changed over time?
A. -- so that there could be no issue with the Department of Health procuring the PPE that it wanted at the speed that it wanted. And, as said, led primarily by the CST, but there a deliberate change to the normal processes to enable pace -- at -- at the expense of the, say, normal amount of rigour and scrutiny that would go into those approvals.
MR KEITH: Thank you.
LADY HALLETT: Right. I have been asked to take a shorter lunch break.
MR KEITH: I'm very sorry.
LADY HALLETT: So I shall return at 1.55 .
(1.04 pm)
(The short adjournment)
( 1.55 pm )
LADY HALLETT: Mr Keith.
MR KEITH: Prime Minister, the reduction from the 2-metre rule to the 1-metre rule, very shortly.

On 2 June, Cabinet decided that the rule needed to be re-examined, you'll recall.
A. On the $2 n d$--
Q. Take it from me, please.
A. Okay.
Q. The analysis showed that there was a very significant
approval so that PPE could get to the people who needed it.

And the last thing to say was no issues were ever substantively raised with me about blocks in that process of delays at all, including -- I think we had a meeting in April on the PPE plan and there's no minutes or anything recorded of there being any issues about that. I think it worked very well from our ability to give the Department of Health the cover it needed and the funding it needed to buy the PPE that it wanted.
Q. The approval process was amended at great speed, very rapidly?
A. Yes.
Q. And lastly, the Treasury was properly concerned in the process as to what sort of checks and balances should be put into place, and that was something then that was negotiated between yourself and the DHSC. So you might suggest, "Well, these are the sorts of conditions that you need to apply when you enter into PPE contracts", so you kept a controlling hand on the overarching system of checks and balances whilst not being concerned with the individual deals?
A. Yes, but those overarching conditions were deliberately flexible --

## 106

difference between the economic impact of a 1-metre rule and that of a 2-metre rule, and you and the Treasury made it absolutely plain that if the 2-metre rule continued, many businesses would remain unviable. Yes or no?
A. So what I did was convene a group of other secretaries of state, including from the departments of Business, DCMS, Transport and Local Government, together with the CDL, to take the evidence.

Few major points. One is that it would make a big difference to the number of businesses that would open, or how they could profitably open. Second was the international comparisons; at that point 24 other countries had something less than 2 metres.

And then thirdly, international organisations like the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Diseases also had recommended something different.

I wrote to the Prime Minister on behalf of that group on 3 June. The Prime Minister then convened a review panel involving the Chief Medical Officer, Chief Economist, I think by -- convened by the Cabinet Secretary. I wasn't involved in that process --
Q. Sorry, I know l've asked you to speed up inferentially. Please try not to speed up too much, it makes it very hard for the stenographer.
A. So that -- I wrote the letter on the 3rd containing our analysis and evidence. The Prime Minister established a panel which included the Chief Medical Officer --
Q. Yes.
A. -- chaired by the Cabinet Secretary. They made a recommendation to the Prime Minister, which he accepted, to move to 1 metre plus.
Q. At the heart of --
A. What was called 1 metre plus.
Q. Yes. At the heart of that debate was the recognition, of course, that the 2-metre rule, if it remained, would be economically hugely damaging, but that whilst SAGE -and it was made absolutely plain to you in an email from your principal private secretary on 4 June, whilst SAGE adhered to the view that science clearly supported the 2-metre rule, the scientific impact was what was described by SAGE as a continuum, not an absolute rule, and that mitigants could be put into place when it's not possible to adhere to 2-metre rule at all times.

So the science leant towards and in favour of the
2-metre rule, but it recognised itself that it was a movable feast, that there could be mitigants put into place, and that it was a policy choice for the government, and that was a matter for government to decide. That's a fair summary, isn't it? 109
my witness statement to jog my memory, but the review panel, I think -- I was not involved in the work of the review panel, it was chaired by the permanent secretary to Number 10, included apparently the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer, alongside the Chief Economic Adviser.

It says here, and again I assume I'm quoting from the report:
"The guidance should change to state that 2 [metres] or 1 [metre] with risk mitigation ... are acceptable, and that businesses should set out the mitigations that they will introduce in their risk assessment."
Q. The review was a policy review which the government was entitled to implement. That is common ground between us, surely? It was a policy decision which the government could take and did?
A. Of course it's the government's --
Q. Thank you.
A. But I think this is an important point. My recollection of it was the Prime Minister deliberately established a panel to bring together, as -- and he would like to, bring together the input from the science -- the Scientific Adviser, the Medical Officer, as well as the economic analysis, consider them together to come up with a recommendation. And -- as I said, I'm quoting 111
A. Yes, and I just go back to -- I think they're important points -- the World Health Organisation and the --
Q. I don't want to ask you about what support there was for it in policy terms. It is obvious that the government was entitled to produce that policy, but also that there was a risk with it, but that it was a risk which the government was entitled to run?
A. Also worth bearing in mind that the Chief Medical Officer himself sat on the review panel that published the final recommendation about moving to 1 metre plus. I think we do need to remember that. The review panel included the Chief Medical Officer and it was their recommendation to move to 1 metre plus or 1 metre with mitigations that the Prime Minister accepted.
Q. No, the Chief Medical Officer was on the review panel, and the review panel recommended that there be that reduction, but the Chief Medical Officer's position himself was: there is a risk but that it's a matter for government not me to resolve the degree to which that risk is entered into by virtue of this policy decision. He never said, "Mr Sunak, in terms of the epidemiological risk, you, the government, can go ahead with the 2-metre reduction to 1-metre rule with my blessing"; that's just not what occurred, is it?
A. Well, my recollection is different, and I'm looking at 110
from it -- I think the report or the summary of its conclusions said that the guidance should change.

So that is a recommendation jointly from the panel, as I read it, which obviously is different to what you said, but l'm just quoting from the panel summary recommendations.
Q. In that debate, an important part, perhaps as equal as the economic considerations, was the question of risk, and the SAGE meeting and the Covid-S meeting and the -in particular the Covid-S meeting of 22 June -- made plain that obviously in that decision was a balance, a balance between the transmission risks and the economic consequences of not doing it. And Covid-S, to which you were of course a party, you were present on that meeting, was made aware that the potential for higher occupancy affects risk. It's an obvious point. The question of transmission risk was something that had to be debated and it was resolved in favour of the economic opening up. Do you agree?
A. Maybe it would be helpful if I -- can we bring up paragraph 257 of my witness statement?
Q. By all means.
A. Because that contains the panel's summary of its conclusions. Again, there's a specific point in paragraph (c) where it says:

112
"... mitigations can reduce the risk at 1 m , so that it is broadly equivalent to being 2 m apart, noting that a precise and quantitative assessment of how much risk is reduced by mitigations is not possible."

And then the paragraph (d) is the bit I was quoting for before, saying that the panel concludes that the guidance should change.

Again, this was a panel that I was not involved in but contained scientific and medical advice alongside economic advice, and it went to the Prime Minister, not to me, and he acted on their recommendation, and I think rightly brought together all sides of the debate.
Q. Mr Sunak, there is no doubt that the review panel made a policy recommendation and it was instituted. The point is a different one.

In making that decision, the government was assisted by expert scientific advice on the risk. In the very nature of that decision there was a balance between the transmission risk and the economic consequences. That's what the debate was all about. So I simply ask you to recognise that in that debate an important consideration, but ultimately not the winning consideration, was what risks are attendant upon such a social distancing change; do you agree that?
A. I wasn't privy to the deliberation on the panel. 113
Q. No, no, please. There is a method to my madness. I'm asking you why, in light of the obvious issue of risk of transmission inherent in any scheme that encouraged households to come together, did the Treasury not consult with SAGE, the CMO, the Secretary of State for Health, or anybody else outside Number 10?
A. Because Eat Out to Help Out had been designed specifically in the context of the safe lifting of NPIs that had already been signed off, as we'd talked about before, as part of the May plan, which had re-opened hospitality, indoor hospitality. That had already been part of the approved May plan. Eat Out to Help Out only operated within that context. And indeed there were a significant range of other NPIs that were in place, including social distancing, Covid secure guidance, table service, contactless ordering, one-way systems, all of which had been put in place. The overall re-opening of indoor hospitality had already been implemented and, as we'd discussed before, modelled and all the rest of it and involved scientists in that, and Eat Out to Help Out was designed to operate within that context, of the safe lifting of NPIs. It didn't do anything further than that.

This was a micro-policy to make sure that that capacity, which the scientists had already said was part 115
Q. Okay.
A. Because I didn't sit on it. All I can point you to is a letter which I sent to the Prime Minister which you have in evidence which explained my admittedly specific point of view about the economics.
Q. I understand that, but your very own witness statement at 257(c) makes plain that the panel considered the risk, risk was an important consideration.

That review, of course, took place -- as you know, it was published on 24 June. On 8 July you presented your plan for jobs to the Cabinet, and Mr Hancock said in evidence, when he gave evidence on 30 November, that it was at that Cabinet meeting on 8 July that he heard about the Eat Out to Help Out scheme for the first time. The scheme was announced, you'll recall, on the same day, 8 July, as part of the plan for jobs.

Given that the Eat Out to Help Out scheme encouraged the coming together of different households in indoor spaces, which it did of course in restaurants, why was that plan not put by the Treasury in front of SAGE, in front of the Secretary of State for Health, and/or the Chief Medical Officer for their consideration of the very same issue of the absolute risk of transmission?
A. So the first thing to say is, why do Eat Out to Help Out at all?

114
of an overall package which could be safely delivered, was actually used. And it was done very much in that context. In the same way that other economic decisions like a VAT cut for hospitality or a stamp duty cut or indeed furlough or anything else, or grants for the hospitality industry, wouldn't ordinarily be cleared with medical advisers, nor was this, because we had already made the collective decision to re-open indoor hospitality and this was a policy that sat within and beneath that.
Q. In addition to the obvious economic policy, which was to encourage consumption in the hospitality sector, to encourage people to use restaurants and to preserve the jobs of women and the lower paid and individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds in the hospitality sector, it's obvious that the plan was designed with a meritorious consideration in mind. But it was also part of that plan, was it not, to address what you had called the "fear", the fact that data showed that our country was far and away the least likely to get back to normal, and to promote what you've described in your Spectator article as an optimistic counternarrative. You wanted to bring about a change in behaviour to encourage people, more people than had previously gone restaurants the previous year, to encourage people to 116
come together. That was part of the policy objective, was it not?
A. I think as you're describing it they're one and the same. My primary concern was protecting millions of jobs of particularly vulnerable people who worked in this industry. All the data, all the evidence, all the polling, all the input from those companies suggested that unless we did something many of those jobs would have been at risk with devastating consequences for those people and their families. And that's why independent think tanks had recommended doing something like this, indeed other countries had done something like this, because everyone was grappling with the same issue: of how to ensure that those jobs are safeguarded as people returned. And that was the primary driver for what we were doing.
Q. And all that material, Mr Sunak, internationally, the material from industry bodies and the like, all referred to the balance, the balance inherent in any scheme to encourage households to come together in greater numbers, the issue of risk of transmission.

Putting aside its obvious economic advantage and putting aside the obviously good policy reasons for encouraging restaurant use in the context of restaurants which were already Covid-safe, there was no getting away 117
Q. The minutes of the meeting of Covid-S, which you attended on 22 June, make clear that Professor Sir Chris Whitty, in the context, you'll recall, of the debate about reduction from 2 metres to 1-metre rule, said the most risky areas of the package were indoor hospitality and the prospect of re-opening schools in September.

So there was a clear flag, of course there was a flag, to the issue of transmission in the context of indoor hospitality. Why did the Treasury not raise expressly the scheme for Eat Out to Help Out in the Covid-S meeting of 16 July, the Covid-S meeting of 22 July, the Covid-S meeting of 6 August, all of which were concerned with transmission risk, August planning, self-isolation periods, schools, scenarios, September return dates, but nothing about Eat Out to Help Out? Why was that?
A. But I think that exactly illustrates my point, because I think what people have missed in this conversation is that there was almost a month between the announcement of Eat Out to Help Out and its commencement. A month. A month for people to raise concerns that they may have had. And actually it's precisely in those three meetings that you mentioned, Covid-S on 16 July, the Chief Medical Officer in the minutes talked about two
from the fact that an issue for you and the Treasury was: will it nevertheless have an impact on transmission? It's the elephant in the room. It couldn't be avoided, could it?
A. Well, no, because you made the point in your remarks, it was about Covid-secure openings. Indoor hospitality had been opened as part of the May roadmap. And not opened in a casual or wanton way, it had been opened with a significant set of restrictions, including social distancing, which limited and reduced significantly the typical occupancy of a restaurant, with one-way systems, with signage, with screens, with shift work, with contactless payments. Indeed, there was 55 pages of government guidance for the hospitality industry, supplemented by 100 pages of guidance from their trade association, UKHospitality, including the need for individual risk assessments at an individual restaurant level. So there was an extraordinary amount of work that had gone into the safe re-opening of hospitality in a way that it was not previously. Right? And it was an entirely different set of hospitality, and within that context, this policy was designed to ensure that the capacity that was available, that had been deemed to be safe, would actually be used in order to safeguard the jobs of some vulnerable people.
significant risk moments: schools and winter. He did not mention Eat Out to Help Out.

On 22 --
Q. Your --
A. If I could just finish, because it's important.

On 22 July the agenda item is August planning, and again it was not raised by the Chief Medical Officer or Chief Scientific Adviser. On 6 August, the Covid-S that you acknowledged, again the minutes show that returning to schools was the single riskiest element of the government's plan. Those three meetings all happened after the announcement of Eat Out to Help Out, all of them involved the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer, they considered specifically the forthcoming risks, and at none of those meetings was it raised by them as an issue. Indeed, the PPS to the Prime Minister has also been specific in his evidence to this Inquiry that he doesn't recall representations being made to them to revisit the policy.

So I know there has been a lot of commentary on this point, but there was almost a month between announcement and commencement. I've outlined my reasons for why we implemented the policy and why we thought it was the right thing to do, and I believe it was the right thing to do to safeguard those jobs in the context of the safe 120
re-opening that had already been agreed, but at none of those moments in those meetings -- there was plenty of opportunity for people to have raised it either with me or with the Prime Minister -- I don't recall, and the minutes do not suggest, that it was raised at all in the three precise meetings that you mentioned.
Q. Those meetings, Mr Sunak, were raised by you in your own witness statement as examples of meetings at which no concerns were raised, but do you accept that the issue of Eat Out to Help Out was never raised by you or your department expressly at those meetings or at any other earlier meeting, and that by the date of those meetings the scheme had already been announced following the Cabinet on 8 July and announced to the public the same day?
A. Butl--
Q. It was already in place --
A. Why would I raise it as a risk when I didn't believe that it was because it was designed in the context of a safe re-opening? The onus is surely on the people who now believed that it was a risk to have raised it at the time when something could have been done about it if they felt strongly.

I'm very clear that I don't believe that it was, because hospitality had been deemed to be safe to 121
raised it at all with anybody outside Number 10?
A. Because, as would be completely normal for all economic policy before fiscal events, that's long-standing practice and always has been so. I wouldn't have discussed the VAT cut on the hospitality sector with the Secretary of State for Health or the stamp duty cut or the grants. These are all either market-sensitive or economic --
Q. No, Mr Sunak, forgive me, those are all fiscal measures. The Eat Out to Help Out scheme encouraged more people, additional numbers from different households, to come together in restaurants to eat. It wasn't just a fiscal issue. It was a behavioural matter. Was it one that was applied across the whole of the United Kingdom?
A. Yes, but so were many of the economic interventions.

But, again, the point remains, indoor hospitality, all the points you made about people coming together and eating, was already part of the May plan, had already been collectively agreed and announced. It had been said to the country restaurants were safe to visit, with all the extra Covid-secure systems that had been put in place. That was the message. So much so that the Cabinet Office ran a national campaign entitled "Enjoy summer safely", backed it with considerable funding and national advertising, partnered with brand name
re-open with a considerable -- as I said, hundreds of pages of guidance, changes in practice, and had been recommended by think tanks and had been done by countries elsewhere. This was a very reasonable sensible policy intervention to help safeguard those jobs in that safe re-opening. That was my view. I didn't believe that it was a risk. I believed that it was the right thing to do. But if others are suggesting they didn't, they had ample opportunity to raise those concerns in forums where I was or where the Prime Minister or others were, and they didn't.
Q. Why didn't you tell the Secretary of State for Health in a public health crisis before 8 July that you were planning on announcing, once it had gone through Cabinet that day, a scheme to Eat Out to Help Out? Why didn't you, bearing in mind that this was a scheme to encourage households to come together, and you'd been debating at the very same time the reduction in the 2-metre to 1 -metre rule, say to the CMO, "We have this plan, it's to encourage the economy to open up, to help the hospitality sector, there are very strong public policy reasons in support of it, but it is obvious there are transmission risks" -- of course there were -- "but our position is it's all right, we are just simply going to have to do this in the greater good"? But you never 122
companies, because the overall approach was to tell the country it was now safe to return to doing these activities because we had made progress on the virus, because we had Track and Trace, because we had the JBC, because we had all this Covid secure guidance. That was the very clear message, backed by a national advertising campaign. It just wouldn't be entirely normal to discuss individual fiscal measures with people that sat within that context.
Q. Do you acknowledge that the evidence from Professor Chris Whitty, Professor Sir Patrick Vallance, Professor Sir Jonathan Van-Tam, respectively the CMO, GCSA, Deputy CMO, is unanimous that had they been consulted they would have advised it was highly likely to increase transmission. And whilst, of course, it's a policy matter over which they wouldn't have had the whip hand, it was an issue on which they would have expected to be consulted given the behavioural aspect of the scheme, the bringing together of more people from different households? Do you acknowledge that?
A. But they've not said that to me, l've not seen that, and, as I said, they had ample opportunity to raise those concerns between the announcement of the scheme and its implementation. None of them chose to do so in any fora that they were in. And I think all of them 124
have said on the record, as the evidence also conclusively demonstrates, that this was in way -- no shape or form responsible for a second wave, which was predicted by the CMO and CSA as early as my first conversation with them in March --
Q. We'll come to --
A. -- and happened in every other country in Europe.
Q. That is a different issue, with respect, and we're going to address that in a moment.

The scheme itself, was it brought to the attention of the devolved administrations? Did you ask for their input or consult with them in any way before the scheme was imposed and introduced in the other four nations -the other three nations?
A. Again, that wouldn't have been ordinary policy. It wasn't on things like the furlough scheme or other support that we did. These are -- the competencies of the UK Government are competencies of the UK Government, and they are announced in the normal way.
Q. Now, on the question of impact, it is absolutely right
that you make plain that whilst there is some slim evidence to suggest that there was a correlation between the take-up of the scheme and new cases of Covid, there is other evidence, primarily in fact a paper prepared by HMRC, to suggest that there was no correlation. Some

And as general rule the Treasury was always wary, as it should be, of temporary things that cost money becoming permanent, because that comes with significant fiscal implications. So the idea was very clearly to have something that was temporary to elicit the behavioural response, and that was always meant to be the case.
Q. So it was about behavioural response in part, it wasn't just about the fiscal support for the sector?
A. I've --
Q. You've just said ...
A. I mean, that's exactly right, because in order to safeguard the jobs of 2 million people working in the sector, you need people to go and use those businesses. And all the evidence, analysis and general view of everyone was that it was unlikely that that was to happen because people were not likely to return to those old behaviours, and this was designed to help encourage them to do so in a safe way. That is the explicit purpose of it. You can't safeguard those jobs without people being at the businesses so that they have the money to keep those jobs and employ those people. That's the whole point.
Q. One codicil to this, please, Mr Sunak.

Mr Hancock told this Inquiry that he'd received feedback that the scheme was "causing problems in our

125
local authorities with very high Eat Out to Help Out take-up had relatively low levels of new Covid cases, some other local authorities with high take-up had higher take-up of the Covid virus. So the evidence doesn't significantly support the proposition that there was an impact on infection rates.

Nevertheless, why was the scheme not extended?
A. Because it was always designed to be temporary.
Q. A submission from HM Revenue \& Customs titled "Eat Out to Help Out extension", dated 26 August, said:
"This is a submission concerning the possible extension of the Eat Out to Help Out scheme. There have been some concerns that opening up the hospitality sector has contributed to the rising rate of infection that have led to local lockdowns."

So was one issue, one concern at the time that debate was had around the extension, that there was in fact or might have been an impact on infection rates?
A. No, the primary motivation was that it was meant to be a temporary intervention. Because in order to elicit -and this is standard economic policy -- in order to elicit a behavioural response, by definition what you want is for something to be temporary, and credibly temporary, because otherwise you don't elicit the behavioural response that you are hoping to achieve. 126
intervention areas", and he said that he'd told HMT about those concerns. And that must have been because -- from the time he said it, at the end of August -- in the context of the debate about whether or not there should be an extension. Are you aware that the Secretary of State for Health, who by your own word didn't know in advance of the Cabinet meeting 8 July of the promulgation of the scheme, expressed concerns latterly to your department about the risk of transmission?
A. No. I'm not sure I have any record of that, but I do know that he has said there has been undue focus on this one item in his evidence to this Inquiry.
Q. Excuse me? You suggest he said this isn't a matter of some importance?
A. I think he said himself that there has been undue focus on this one item, was his words to the Inquiry, and he certainly -- I have no recollection of him raising that, nor do I have any record of him doing so with me at the time.
Q. Well, it's a matter for my Lady, but matters as to whether or not they are of importance for this Inquiry are for this Inquiry.

Scientific advice. It is obvious, Mr Sunak, that throughout the pandemic, SAGE, which consisted of highly 128
distinguished expert contributors, gave enormous time and energy over hundreds of meetings in the service of the government. Do you agree that?
A. Yes, and I very much -- I make that same point in my witness statement as well, and I'm grateful to them for everything they did.
Q. You say in the article in The Spectator that a lady was planted on SAGE. You said:
"'The Sage people didn't realise for a very long time that there was a Treasury person on all their calls ...'"

And in the article you describe how this meant that you were "alerted early to the fact that these all-important minutes of SAGE often edited out dissenting voices".

It's difficult to know how much of that is journalistic flourish, but would you accept that everybody who attended SAGE -- the identity of everybody who attended SAGE was known to SAGE and the secretariat that ran SAGE because of course they all had to give their identities and their phone numbers for the purposes of the calls that took place?
A. Well, as I said, there, I wasn't -- it wasn't apparent to me in some conversations then that they did realise, but, I mean, it's almost by-the-by, the point was there 129

LADY HALLETT: That's a question for the journalist, I think, Mr Keith.
MR KEITH: Would you accept that whilst the science was highly complex and uncertain, and obviously not susceptible to clear outcomes, that the advice given by SAGE was, over the entirety of the pandemic, given in good faith and at the upper limits of all their professional abilities?
A. Yes, I make that same point in my witness statement. But having considered this, and there's again some reflections looking back at this time with regard to SAGE, I think there are a few things that, you know, I've reflected on over time that I probably was less focused on at the time.

I think the first one was, and this is the point that I was getting at in the article, SAGE's views were presented as a consensus or a single view. I think there was a -- definitely not an accurate perception of the degree of debate and perhaps lack of consensus within SAGE. I think that is how it was presented, again. Not to take away in any way from them, but it was presented as a more singular view when in fact there was more debate within SAGE about most things.

I think secondly --
Q. Can I ask you to pause there, and just ask you about 131
was someone there who was feeding back information which is incredibly helpful, and you've shared some of it before, summaries of which were often given to me verbally.
Q. Vanessa MacDougall, who was a member of your department at that time, was encouraged to attend. In fact Sir Patrick Vallance had encouraged the attendance of somebody from Treasury on SAGE in correspondence with Sir Tom Scholar. Was Sir Tom Scholar the permanent secretary in your department?
A. Yes.
Q. Right. In that same article, you also say:
"... for a year, UK government policy -- and the fate of millions -- was being decided by half-explained graphs cooked up by outside academics."

That wasn't a reference to SAGE, was it?
A. Sorry, where is that?
Q. It's page 6:
"... UK Government policy -- and the fate of millions -- was being decided by half-explained graphs cooked up by outside academics."
A. Those aren't my words, just so we're clear.
Q. Why would they appear in an article with you exclusively devoted to the issue of your performance during the pandemic crisis?
your views on that first point, Mr Sunak.
A. Okay.
Q. Evidence has been given to the effect that, indeed, the consensus minutes were relatively short, designed to allow people to read them. Evidence has also been given as to the extent to which they were read. But it's obvious that Number 10 had officials attend SAGE, Mr Warner attended, and it's obvious that HMT had an official attend as well, in order precisely that the wider range of views could be made clear to their sponsoring departments, Number 10 and HMT.

Would that, did that not suffice? You were aware of --
A. I don't think that was the explicit reason that someone was on the calls. They were just there more generally. And I'm not -- I'm making the point that I think just more generally in the policy debates that were being had, and in the external communications, I'm not sure the country probably understood that there was less consensus within SAGE than was being presented, because this was an inherently tricky subject --
Q. And on that issue, some evidence has been given to the effect that, of course, SAGE responded to commission requests from the government, the government would raise issues with it to which it responded, and of course SAGE 132
advise while government decides, that's self-evident.
In your reflections, do you think SAGE could ever have been put in a position of making specific recommendations, that is to say giving specific advice on policy outcomes, off its own bat?
A. No, I think they're conflating two different things there. The first is, even on the advice, not the specific policy recommendations, even on the scientific advice that they were putting, I think as many of them have now said, that they themselves were deeply divided over the scientific evidence. That's from one of them that was there at the time. I think that was underappreciated. And I think we -- in hindsight, and on reflection, it probably would be good to have made sure that there was a broader awareness of that point.

I think the second thing is the science itself, as you pointed out, Mr Keith, was itself uncertain. I think people hear "science", and I reflect on it, and they think: science, okay, two plus two equals four, that's what this is. It clearly wasn't like that. This was uncertain science. As the scientists themselves say, it would be too simplistic to say that there was one answer on these things, and itself was prone to change. So SAGE's advice on asymptomatic transmission, the benefit of face masks or schools, all of that 133
over, which was public health.
Now, there's been a lot of commentary and debate over this point about how much there was a focus more on SAGE than other aspects of it. I think everyone from
SAGE in -- has subsequently made it crystal clear that they view policymakers as having to take into account many other considerations in their deliberations. I think they would say that, Chief Scientific Adviser has said that, I would agree with that. And they had one very important input into that multifaceted process.
Q. Forgive me. If all they were doing was providing advice, why did you say in that Spectator article, "If you empower all these independent people, you're screwed", "We shouldn't have empowered the scientists in the way we did"?
A. Yeah, I think -- what I would refer to there is I think a similar comment was made by the director for the Institute for Government, and he talked about the public attention and distorting consequences of extreme focus on SAGE. I think that was the point, that in the debate there was, as I say, a kind of elevation of SAGE in that debate. And I think again, on reflection, that is something to consider, whether that was appropriate. Because SAGE, as we've discussed and they would themselves be open about, had a particular focus, but it 135
changed over time. So science itself was not certain, it was not singular, there was more debate about it.

I'm not sure that nuance was communicated perhaps as much as it should have been, so that people could understand the decisions we were making. It wasn't as simple as crystal clear science view, crystal clear some other view. The science itself had a range of views --
Q. Of course.
A. And again for simplicity, reaching a consensus is obviously helpful for policymakers, but we can't lose sight of the fact that it was more complex than that.
Q. But you obviously understood that SAGE advised while government decided? There was no question of you thinking at any time these scientists are doing any more than giving advice to the government based on their best knowledge and experience as to what the consequences are of any particular policy decision the government reaches? SAGE never said, "You, the government, must on Monday impose a lockdown"; it just didn't work like that, did it?
A. I'm not sure quite how the advice was phrased --
Q. Well, you've read the consensus minutes.
A. I can't remember exactly the language it was using, but in general SAGE's job was to provide advice to the government but in the sphere that they had competence 134
was only one focus, that policymakers had to take into consideration when making decisions, yet there was -you know, there was no -- I'm sure we'll come on to it later -- economic SAGE and the like, you know, there wasn't an equivalent or a similar, in the public's eyes, something like SAGE for other aspects of it. And whether that distorted, in the words of the IFG director, the debate is, I think, open to discussion and deliberation, and that --
Q. We will come back to economic SAGE in a moment, Mr Sunak.
A. Yes.
Q. Just before we leave, though, the question of SAGE as it was, did you form any view over time as to the process by which the SAGE advice was funnelled through the Chief Medical Officer and the GCSA to the Prime Minister? It's plain that they gave verbal briefings to the Prime Minister, who may or may not have read the SAGE minutes, as to what the import was of the advice that was being given almost twice a week, three times a week during the crisis. Did you have a view as to whether that funnel system was working?
A. I -- it's probably not something that I had any great understanding of, the relationship between SAGE and the Prime Minister. As I said, I had a -- I think, a more 136
granular understanding of what was happening at SAGE because, as you pointed out, someone was there able to relay to me, where it was relevant, a slight nuance or where there were debates and disagreements. That was helpful for me, when I went into meetings, knowing that there may be more -- more debate within SAGE than was necessarily being presented in the summary of their discussion.
Q. All right.

On the issue of economic SAGE, you are aware that the Institute for Government report on the Treasury during Covid from 2023 posited the possibility of a parallel committee to SAGE being formed to address socioeconomic issues. So that the epidemiological and scientific issues could be fed through the existing SAGE. In parallel, analogously, there would be a socioeconomic SAGE which would deal with the other countervailing considerations. It could then be brought together with another body or brought together at government level.

Did you or your officials ever contemplate the institution of such a committee or take part in a debate as to whether this was a good idea to pursue?
A. It was never something that was raised with me, and I think the evidence that you've heard from the Treasury 137
definitively.
Q. In any event, none of this was raised with you, notwithstanding what must have been your extant contemporaneous concerns about SAGE?
A. No, but this is a -- this is a different point. This is about --
Q. No, did you express internally or to others your concerns about the empowerment of scientists during the crisis, Mr Sunak? In which case, why was there not more consideration given to this alternative model by the Treasury?
A. Ah, so I think the question is there are different -- as I understand the debate on the economic SAGE -- which again just for the record was not something that I remember being raised with me at all or the Prime Minister during this period, I think we should just be clear about that. I don't think he has any recollection of it being raised, nor do his office, nor do I. But I think there are different rationales as to why people think an economic SAGE might have been helpful, and it's important to separate them because they're two very different rationales.

One is that the modelling expertise or more generally the expertise didn't exist inside the Treasury to do the job. But that is something that I don't think 139
corporate, and the Chief Economic Adviser makes clear that it was never put forward as a formal proposal, nor was an official HMT view ever sought. So that's the evidence that you have from the Treasury.
Q. Can I just pause you there. She indeed, and it's Clare Lombardelli from HMT, attended a meeting or a seminar on 5 June --
A. Yes, one meeting.
Q. And a number of options were posited: an economic SAGE, a single model or something more informal.

She says in an email to her colleagues in the Treasury -- thank you, INQ000235261 -- that:
"The economists [obviously] killed the single model, some liked the idea of an economics SAGE. It was agreed that Ben Warner would follow up with me, Vallance, Stephen Aldridge and Ian Diamond."

Sir Patrick Vallance is obviously the reference to "Vallance". Ian Diamond is the chair of the Office for National Statistics. Stephen Aldridge, is he HMT?
A. You know I don't -- I don't know. He was the person that was on top of the memo that you had before.
Q. He was indeed.
A. I recollect working with him in a previous role in a different department, which is -- and I don't remember working with him at the Treasury, so I can't tell you 138
is true. I think the Treasury did have the capability to do the analysis that we needed, it improved it over time, but it also engaged extensively with external people and economists, as it should do, to build that advice, use new forms of data.

And the second thing is there exist already independent organisations, principally the OBR, but also the Bank of England and others, so HMT is not operating in a vacuum, there are many other independent bodies doing a very similar job and doing it at a very high level. So I don't think that that reason for an economic SAGE stacks up. I'm happy to elaborate.

There's a separate rationale, which I think, Mr Keith, is a bit more what you were alluding to, which is that it might be helpful as a counterweight in the narrative, because if you had a public health SAGE, then you needed an economic SAGE. Now, that's a different reason. I'm not personally particularly persuaded by that, because I think the expertise exists, it's more for government to decide how it wants to appropriately balance these things, communicate --
Q. You are, with respect, the government now. You must have formed a view as to whether or not, in the light of this crisis, the optimum system was put into place and whether or not there is, in fact, a very good argument 140
for having a parallel body for dealing with other non-scientific considerations?
A. I'm not particularly persuaded that it's necessary, because, unlike SAGE, that expertise exists within government departments. The Treasury has the ability to do the modelling and the analysis that's necessary on the economy and there are -- it works with external bodies. Indeed, you mentioned Ian Diamond. He himself has said that he worked closely with the Treasury during this period, I think is indicative of their approach.
There are other organisations that do the same type of thing.

And ditto in other departments, that expertise will already exist. The difference with SAGE is that expertise did not exist within DH, as I understand it, which is why it was necessary. So I don't think that rationale really supports the need for an economic SAGE.

There's a separate point, though, about titles, structures. Not to develop extra information but just how they are weighed in the debate, in the discussion. Again, l've expressed some views about reflections about how SAGE was perceived, which I think I tend to agree with the Institute for Government comment that there was kind of -- I forget his exact words, but there was a slightly disproportionate focus. I think that's 141
every department, by the way, including Department of Health and everything else.
Q. Yes, but of course we are examining this issue in the unique circumstances of the ultimate decision-making process that the Prime Minister was forced to engage with, which is how to balance economic, societal and the many other considerations in a way which would command confidence and bring, of course, the government and the public with it.
A. Again I think even if the precise advice itself wasn't published, there was considerable information in the public domain, put there by HMT alongside all the fiscal events that I did, of which there were many during this period, but also by the government's independent forecast. So you have to remember, for over a decade now the government has had an independent forecaster, so it doesn't mark its own homework, in the OBR. They published extensively on the impacts of all these things, as did the Bank of England, who contain probably more people engaged in forecasting and modelling the UK economy than anyone else. And then again you have the IMF, the OECD and investment banks. So I don't think --
Q. I'm so sorry, could you slow down a little bit.
A. Sorry, I was taking your steer to move along, sorry, I misinterpreted the signal.
right. That doesn't necessarily mean you need to create countervailing structures elsewhere, you can just choose to communicate or think about SAGE differently, or science SAGE.

Again, people may have different points of view on that, reasonable people can disagree, but my reflections are that it wouldn't necessarily have added to anything.
Q. It's obvious that the Treasury provided detailed analysis to Number 10, relayed through you, relayed through these bilateral meetings, relayed as part of emails to Number 10 or the Cabinet Office. But that advice, of course, was not transparent in the same way that the SAGE advice was, would you agree? These weren't reflections of an HMT committee, the minutes of which were then condensed and published and made known to the world.
A. Yes, I think that is -- well, actually, it's not quite right, because HMT did publish a considerable amount of information --
Q. Of underlying data. But the data, the information, the advice and the analysis which was given directly to Downing Street by HMT was never itself published, was it?
A. I think that is -- I mean, it's entirely normal. But yes, I mean -- I think that's the same that goes for 142
Q. I didn't tell you to go so fast that we can't keep up.
A. So I think my point would be there was considerable information about the economic impacts on the economy in the public domain not just from HMT but many other independent expert bodies. So even if this specific advice on a micro point wasn't published there was a lot of evidence out there -- look, is it possible that HMT could have published even more? Perhaps. I think --
Q. You bemoan in the article in The Spectator the absence of cost-benefit calculations. You say:
"... a basic requirement for pretty much every public health intervention -- [but this] was never made."

What did you mean by that?
A. Again, I think I'm just agreeing with something that one of the epidemiologists has subsequently said, that, you know, cost-benefit in a precise way wasn't done. I think you talked about it, Mr Keith, in our early conversation about March, where the -- you know, just was just happening very quickly. I mentioned QALY analysis before, you told me not to mention it, but that would be an example of a cost-benefit analysis that has been used in other aspects of healthcare. And indeed, independent academics used it to evaluate the benefits and costs of the first lockdown. That was the broader 144
point I was making.
Q. There was, it appears from the evidence of Clare Lombardelli, at the beginning of the pandemic, no pre-existing model of how a pandemic would affect the economy, there was no material showing what the estimated costs would be likely to be. Of course. During the course of the pandemic, did you instruct the Treasury to start preparing cost-benefit calculations on account of your view that those sorts of analyses were simply not there?
A. I think that would be more a function for the Cabinet Office and the taskforce, and that's exactly what you would exact the taskforce to, over time, be able to do, which is to synthesise the different -- the different things from different areas, you know, try and bring them together. So that -- that's really what the taskforce over time was able to do a better job at.
Q. Mr Sunak, the HMT is a wizard in the field of fiscal and economic matters and cost-benefit analyses. You can't bemoan in The Spectator on one hand the absence of any calculation along those lines and then say that it's something that you expect the Cabinet Office to have done. Why didn't the Treasury say, "The government would be hugely assisted by calculations that bring together the cost-benefit thinking about future 145
Q. Indeed, I don't think anybody has suggested that.

Could we now look, please, at the winter strategy briefly, and September/October. The winter strategy document of 19 September made plain that the infection was spreading rapidly. The seven-day average of confirmed cases had risen from 1,077 in mid-August to "3,598 today", that's 19 September, and is on a sharp upward trajectory, and there are references to what the hospital admissions might be if no further measures are implemented.

As a general rule, and I'm sure you would accept this proposition, the Treasury briefed you, we can see a briefing for a Covid Strategy Committee, Covid-S meeting on 21 September, to oppose a circuit-breaker -obviously a proposal for circuit-breakers was what was being discussed -- on the basis that the Treasury feared that a circuit-breaker of perhaps two to three weeks wouldn't itself be enough, if that was the route that would be pursued, and also there was a risk that if it was only two to three weeks the government might find itself in the awful position of coming out of a circuit-breaker whilst the number of deaths is still going in the wrong direction. So there were good arguments to be made against circuit-breaker; you made them, did you not?
lockdowns, let's do it"?
A. Because I think it's an incredibly hard thing to do. I think we shouldn't just assume that it was available off-the-shelf to just do. These are incredibly complex decisions, and in many cases very hard to quantify. I mean, many health decisions are trade-offs. I mean, how do you think about quantifying -- we do it with drugs often with QALY analysis, but the moral dimensions to these things is very complex.

My point is the Cabinet Office -- the taskforce is the right place to bring together different aspects of it. Now, we seconded -- actually the Treasury seconded ten people to the taskforce particularly to help with all of this. And again, I think, a reflection on all of this for the future is if someone has developed a better way to integrate these things, then that's something that -- expertise one would ideally like to have next time around.

But I'm not sure that it's that straightforward. I think you can do illustrative cost-benefit analyses, as indeed the academics who produced the QALY paper did, but we shouldn't pretend that you could reduce all these things to a simple number that the Prime Minister can just see and then make a decision based on it. It will never be that straightforward. 146
A. Yes, I was never particularly persuaded by the circuit-breaker, as indeed others weren't either.
Q. And it's fair to say that at the meeting of Covid-S on 21 September, and also the COBR and Cabinet meetings on the 22nd, you presented analysis from HMT showing how a circuit-breaker would hit the hospitality sector incredibly hard, with consequential damage to its vulnerable workforce; that's all very obvious.

In the course of Professor Sir Chris Whitty's oral evidence, he said this in response to a question:
"Question: ... had there perhaps been a circuit breaker in September, had perhaps a tier level system been introduced earlier and had time to work over a longer period of time, there remains the possibility that that second lockdown might not have been necessary --
"Answer: Yeah --
"Question: -- or might not have been as long?
"Answer: I think that is -- I think most people would say that's the case."

So that we're absolutely clear, there was nothing wrong with opposing a circuit-breaker, the government was a very, very difficult position and the arguments were extremely finely balanced between damage to the economy and the public health considerations in terms of 148
rising infection; is that obvious?
A. Yes, it was obvious -- obviously a finely balanced decision, indeed the CSA and the CMO used that phrase, I think, at a press conference at the time.
Q. They did.
A. And it was also the case that SAGE themselves said that the evidence base on which to judge the effectiveness and harms associated with different interventions was weak at that moment in time, and that policymakers would have to consider a whole range of impacts alongside the epidemiological impacts.

So that was the context of the discussion at the time, even from the medical and scientific advisers and the kinds of things that they were saying. Indeed, I think the Deputy Chief Medical Officer as late as the end of October, about 20 October, himself in a press conference said that he didn't think a national firebreak was the right policy, and that was a month after the deliberations that we're talking about at the end of September.
Q. There was a meeting on 20 September in Downing Street or Chequers, I can't recall where, where the Prime Minister met with -- you'll recall because you were there -Professors Edmunds and McLean and Professor Gupta, Professor Heneghan, and Anders Tegnell of Sweden. 149
reasonable for the Prime Minister to seek a diversity of opinion as he's coming to make decisions. A question for him really more than me. I was invited to a meeting, I went to a meeting. But I don't think there's anything wrong with hearing from a range of people. I think that's a healthy process and if some people -- there's long evidence of -- in behavioural psychology about, you know, people getting into groupthink and the Prime Minister, if he wants to get out of consensus views, again, inherently there's nothing wrong with that, I don't think --
Q. I haven't suggested --
A. -- on from the UK --
Q. Mr Sunak, so that we don't have an unnecessary hare run, I'm not suggesting that it was wrong to seek that advice, I'm merely asking you whether or not you wondered why you had been asked to attend alongside that scientific advice from the range, the spectrum from which it derived; you didn't think about it?
A. No.
Q. All right.

The tier system. We can deal with this very briefly, because it is obvious that there were a number of meetings in front of Covid-S to consider the recommendation from the Covid Taskforce that there be 151

Did you reflect upon why that meeting was being called, given the government's stated position that it would follow the science, by which it presumably meant its own Chief Medical Officer and Government Chief Scientific Adviser?
A. I wasn't responsible for organising the meeting, so you have to -- I guess whoever organised it would be the person to ask.
Q. Did you express views in the meeting in support of Professor Heneghan and Professor Gupta's stated position, which was essentially that there was no requirement for there to be a lockdown and that, in the general scheme of things, a lockdown would be an overreaction, massively damaging and epidemiologically not required?
A. I don't have any strong recollections of the meeting, it was Prime Minister wanting to hear from a range of different scientists and get their views, some domestic and one from Sweden, as you mentioned.
Q. You must have asked yourself, at a particularly intense time: why am I attending this meeting to hear the views of scientists who are outside the range of, I suppose, the consensus range of evidential advice that was being received from SAGE?
A. It didn't strike me as odd and I think entirely
a tier system.
You discussed on 8 October with the Prime Minister directly the health and economic arguments, and then following that day, I think perhaps that night or the next day, the Cabinet Secretary briefed officials that you and the Prime Minister had agreed that the government would seek to negotiate the restrictions which were a necessary part of the tier process.

Mr Hancock has said in evidence that he knew at the time of the announcement of the tiered system on 12 October that it wouldn't work.

What was your view as to the likelihood that this tier system, which to remind ourselves of course was imposed from 12 October and required these detailed local negotiations to take place, would work? Did you have a view on it?
A. I think -- I mean, well, the strong -- I say strong -I mean, the general consensus, I think, amongst our medical and scientific advisers on -- going into the autumn was that a local approach was the right approach. You can see that in the SAGE minutes consistently from the end of June, you know, they talk about an emphasis on local control. I think I remember the Chief Medical Officer in Cabinet either at the beginning of October or end of September making the point that actually the UK's 152
national outbreak in the first wave had been an exception to the pattern across Europe, where Italy and Spain in particular had seen more localised outbreaks, and I think he said, in the minutes it's recorded, that it's possible the second wave will be localised. And again that, even once we ended up going into a second -- I think the proof is here, actually, even once we ended up going into a second national lockdown, the Cabinet minutes I think from 10 November reflect the CMO's views that reintroducing the tiered system after the national measures seemed entirely rational.

So I think the strong point of view of everyone was that a local approach was sensible to try. He thought that even after we'd gone into a national lockdown. I think --
Q. Forgive me, you've referred to the SAGE minutes consistently from the end of June. By October and the time of the introduction of the tier system, the CMO and the GCSA had made it absolutely plain that this would simply not suffice to reduce the R below 1 and that the only epidemiologically justified route was a more stringent circuit-breaker or lockdown. The position had changed, had it not, by October?
A. Well, in the minutes of the 20 October Cabinet meeting 153
it was, bluntly, a bit of a chance as to whether or not epidemiologically --
A. Ah.
Q. -- it would work?
A. Right. Well, then I would --
Q. I mean, there was a system in place concerning the --
A. Yeah.
Q. -- negotiations --
A. No, I understand, I understand your question.
Q. -- which were difficult.
A. Well, in which case I would just point you to the remarks of the Deputy Chief Medical Officer on 20 October in the press conference, where he was asked and he said, "This national firebreak you talk about, no, I don't think that's right, and I don't think it's consistent with the epidemiological picture we are seeing, I think it would be very difficult to justify".

The Chief Medical -- I think the -- not the Chief Medical Officer but maybe the medical director at the NHS also made a point after that in the same press conference about the varied epidemiological impact they were seeing around the country in hospitals. So at the end of October, exactly on the date that you're talking about, in public the Deputy Chief Medical Officer was saying that he didn't think national action would be 155
the CMO is recorded as saying the country remains split into three broad categories, this justified the government's approach of three tiers of local alert level.
Q. Yes.
A. That's in the Cabinet meetings on 20 October.
Q. And in that meeting on and 11 October he made it plain that, epidemiologically, there was a very high risk that the tier system would not work to bring R below 1, you were aware of that?
A. As I said, on 20 October he said that it justified the government's approach of three tiers at a local alert level. That's in the Cabinet minutes on 20 October.
Q. All right.
A. And even after the national lockdown, he said that it would be entirely rational to reintroduce the tiering system.
Q. Yes, but that, of course, is after the --
A. But I'm saying it goes to the point that the principle of a tiered system is one which had con -- I think wide support amongst scientific and health advisers.
Q. We may be at cross purposes --
A. Yes, I fear we are.
Q. Obviously there is a justification for a tier system within its own parameters, but was it not apparent that 154
justified, given the varied epidemiological picture across the country. And that was backed up I think by Steve Powis in the same press conference.
Q. Forgive me, in the Cabinet and the Covid-S meetings, which you attended as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, you were aware that epidemiologically this was a bit of a chance. It was quite likely it would not work to bring $R$ below 1 but it was, in policy terms, a position open to the government to take and one that you supported, because of course you would be violently opposed to a lockdown?
A. I think that's not a fair characterisation of my position. I was opposed to a circuit-breaker in September because I didn't think it would have achieved its stated objectives, something that I think most people now acknowledge to be the case and l've seen in evidence people now accepting that it wouldn't have prevented the need for a second lockdown. Indeed, it didn't work in Wales when it was tried. So I was specifically opposed to a circuit-breaker, again, as I've --
Q. Yes, l've --
A. I think -- I think "violently opposed" to lockdowns is not an accurate characterisation of my position at that time. I was opposed to a circuit-breaker on its own 156
merits, because I didn't think it would work.
Now, at the end of October -- we can both quote minutes back at each other, I'm looking at a Cabinet minute from 20 October where the Chief Medical Officer is saying --
Q. What was your position, Mr Sunak, by 30 October, in relation to the lockdown decision of 4 November?
A. As the minutes showed, I didn't oppose it at the end of -- into November, I didn't oppose that lockdown. But what I can tell you, that it was reasonable to believe at the end of October that the regional approach may still work. That was a reasonable belief.

Now, obviously it turned out not to be right, with the benefit of hindsight, but when you have the Deputy Chief Medical Officer themselves saying at the end of October that he doesn't believe that national action is warranted because it wasn't consistent with the varied regional picture we're seeing, that demonstrates to you that reasonable people believed that that -- the regional approach may still work and it was worth trying.

Now, clearly, in the event, it didn't. But as we discussed earlier, these things were finely balanced, lots of things to think about, but was it a reasonable approach at the time? I think so, and it was 157
A. No, no, the debate, and as I think the record shows and the evidence shows, the point I made to him, which he did consider but ultimately disagreed with me on, was to consider whether it was necessary to shut non-essential retail as part of that lockdown. That's what the record shows. I put that. It -- the Prime Minister I think said he wanted to think over that. He ended up deciding that it was worth shutting it down -- because by this point we had the evidence from SAGE that confirmed the very minimal impact on $R$ from closing non-essential retail. So by this point we had that data. So I said reasonable to consider whether that was necessary given the impact it would have on those people's jobs, doesn't have any impact on $R$ as far as we're being told. Prime Minister thought about it, decided to include it in the lockdown, for simplicity of -- or whatever, I don't know why exactly, but the simplicity of the overall approach. But that was my main specific point about that decision, was purely on non-essential retail.
Q. All right.
A. And that is I think recorded in all the evidence that you have.
Q. It is.

Three final questions, please.
Firstly, inappropriately and unattractively, there 159
extensively debated. So in terms of thinking about the decision-making process, even if the decision might be one that in hindsight people would revisit, I don't think there was any failure in the process, because it was extensively debated in government.
Q. Do we take it from that that you had every opportunity to dissuade the Prime Minister from the ultimate decision to oppose the lockdown in November 2020? You were heard, your voice was listened to, but ultimately the Prime Minister in effect decided that there had to be a lockdown?
A. It was always the case that decisions ultimately laid with the Prime Minister, that's the same throughout, and my job throughout, as I've said, was to make him aware of the impacts of the decisions. And I always felt that I had that opportunity.
Q. Did you specifically say to him, "Prime Minister, my position as the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a lockdown is not warranted"? For all the reasons that this Inquiry understands and for all the reasons reflected in the paperwork before you and before this Inquiry, in that ultimate debate your view was "I think this is the wrong decision" --
A. No.
Q. -- is that what you told him?
is material which shows that the Treasury was pejoratively associated with death. Some officials in Number 10 described the Treasury as the "pro death squad", obviously on account of the fact that the Treasury was seen to be opposed to maximum public health interventions and was -- quite properly, as we've established -- promoting the issue of the need to avoid economic and societal damage and harm.

Were you aware that the Treasury was being referred to in those terms? You may not have been aware.
A. I wasn't, and I do not think it is a fair characterisation --
Q. Indeed.
A. -- on the incredibly hard working people that I was lucky to be supported by at the Treasury, and in the same way earlier you talked about the people at SAGE being motivated by doing what they thought was best in the public interest, I would say exactly the same about all the people who worked with me at the Treasury, who worked extremely hard throughout the entire period and, as you kindly alluded to earlier, and the IFG report, are widely considered to have done some things that no one had thought possible, that saved millions of people's livelihoods and helped the economy get through, and therefore helped families get through, and support 160
the country through a difficult time. I'm grateful to them for what they did, and, as I said, I don't think that is a fair characterisation of how they approached their jobs at all.
Q. Indeed

It is obvious that many of the very difficult decisions which had to be taken by government were themselves highly politicised. They are decisions which engage the public, they have given rise to an enormous amount of public anxiety as well as public heat and light, and it's obvious that the government acted, whenever it acted, in good faith and doing the best that it possibly could. That is its stated position and there is no basis for challenging that.

One particularly contentious issue is the issue of free meals in holidays. You'll recall, Prime Minister, that Marcus Rashford, the footballer, spearheaded a campaign, "Make the U-turn" campaign. He campaigned for holiday food vouchers for children who were entitled to free school meals. And an extract from Sir Patrick Vallance's diary refers to a meeting on 13 June 2021 when this issue came up, and Sir Patrick has suggested that somebody at the meeting said "Good working people pay for their children to eat and don't want freeloaders", and he has suggested that in the 161

LADY HALLETT: Shall we take the break now?
MR KEITH: Please.
LADY HALLETT: I shall return at 3.25.
( 3.08 pm )
(A short break)
( 3.25 pm )
LADY HALLETT: Given the time and obviously the
Prime Minister's other commitments, I'm afraid I'm going to have to be particularly tough on core participants' questioning this afternoon.

First of all, Ms Morris.
Questions from MS MORRIS KC
MS MORRIS: Thank you, my Lady.
Mr Sunak, I ask questions on behalf of Covid
Bereaved Families for Justice UK, and I have been given permission to ask questions on one topic, and that is financial support for care home workers. So I'm going to put a short number of propositions to you from the evidence already before the Chair and I'm going to ask you two short questions about them.

First of all, the Inquiry has already heard from Mr Hancock, and according to his second statement it had been realised by early June 2020 that agency workers moving from one care home to another was a key pathway through which the virus was entering care homes to

## devastating effect.

According to him, at a Covid-O meeting on 15 September 2020, it was agreed that regulations would be brought in to prohibit staff movement between care homes as a matter of law, and the proposals were drafted and then went out for consultation.

By December 2020, he described how DHSC had finalised proposals which included a compensation package for such workers' foregone hours which required Treasury agreement. That's clearly where I'm going to ask you about your involvement.

However, Mr Hancock said at, just for the record, paragraph 491 of his second statement, that:
"... it became clear that HMT was reticent to fund a scheme to support staff affected by the proposed regulation, and the implementation of the plan was delayed again."

And in fact he uses the word "opposition" in the same paragraph .

According to a later DHSC submission to Mr Hancock on 5 January, this time 2021, it noted that HMT ministers decided not to fund the compensation scheme, saying it was the wrong mechanism but they are open to options to support increased staff supply.

Mr Hancock described how, in the event, the proposed 164
regulations to restrict the movement of workers were not brought forward due to the lack of compensation in work for(?) shortages at that stage.

So my first question is: what was your involvement in this process, Mr Sunak, and what was the reluctance and reticence?
A. Well, the first thing to say that, you know, in particular from the beginning of the pandemic I was cognisant that this would have an enormous impact on the NHS and social care workforce, family and organisations, which is why we put an enormous amount of funding in place to support them. Now, obviously for social care that largely goes through local authorities, so one of the earliest things we did was provide billions of pounds extra for local authorities in unringfenced grants so that they would have extra funds to spend on the things they needed to at the time, and that was done I can't remember exactly what date, but relatively early on in the pandemic.

Now, with regard to social care in particular, I wasn't, and I don't have any strong recollection of these sets of conversations, I wasn't primarily involved with them to the best of my knowledge, and I think you referenced an advice that HMT ministers --
Q. Ministers, yes.

January 2021. My second question is this: given that staff movement was a primary contributor to care home infections, and according to the Department of Health still a key infection prevention and control concern at a time of increased incidence, why was there still no mechanism to incentivise and/or to compensate care home staff to confine themselves to working in one care home by January 2021?
A. Well, I think if I check the details I think there was some new funding announced on 16 January and the CST had considered a proposal from DH about a general fund to boost the social care workforce and had approved it, and it was precisely to support providers to restrict staff movement between care homes and other care settings, et cetera, et cetera. So I think those conversations were happening and a fund was announced, as far as I can tell, but again it wasn't something that I was directly involved in, that was the chief secretary to the Treasury's primary responsibility.
Q. And you would agree from the documents that you're referring to and that I'm referring to that that wasn't in place before January 2021, despite the conversations taking place between the departments and the chief secretary for the Treasury?
A. Yes, I don't remember these conversations, again, 167
A. The person responsible, which I think is clear from the documented evidence, was the chief secretary to the Treasury, and he is the minister responsible for spending, and he was the one that was going back and forth with the Department of Health on the various options that were available. I think in the Department of Health advice, I haven't got the exact date, it says "CST considered funding an alternative proposal, not convinced the policy will achieve its aim". And also the DH advice was that -- whether to proceed when we nearly have the vaccine was already in the balance. So I know that there were conversations happening between the chief secretary and the department, they were not ones that I was sighted on or involved in.
Q. So, in short, did it cross your desk?
A. Not to my recollection. And having reviewed best I can some of the evidence at the time with the Treasury, as I said, these specific two proposals on compensation mechanisms and things were dealt with by him. In the event I think a general fund was established at some point for the social care workforce specifically around this time, but again it wasn't something that I was directly involved in.
Q. The question I have is specifically aimed around this period between the end of 2020 and prior to 166
happening until immediately before then anyway, having reviewed this pack from the Treasury. It sounds like those conversations were predominantly happening in and around December, with an announcement in January.
Q. Okay.
A. And I think there's another point that's worth making, that in the end I think key system partners no longer supported it, and that's something that I think the Secretary of State for Health and his officials have also said in their evidence. It wasn't just the funding, it was -- actually the mechanics of making it work, I think, weren't -- as I said, key system partners no longer supported it, was the conclusion they had come to as well.
Q. But one of the reasons the regulations was not put in place by that point was because of the lack of financial package; would you agree with that?
A. I don't -- as I've said, it's not something that I was directly involved in. And I think there were separate regulations that had been considered, but again it was not something that I was actively involved in, so it's hard for me to comment much beyond what l've said.
MS MORRIS: Thank you.
Thank you, my Lady, those are my questions.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much indeed, Ms Morris. 168

Ms Harris? No. It's Ms Gowman, exactly. Mr Sunak, I don't know if you can see Ms Gowman --
THE WITNESS: I can.
LADY HALLETT: -- if you look round the pillar.
THE WITNESS: No, no, I can.
LADY HALLETT: Sorry about the pillars.

## Questions from MS GOWMAN

MS GOWMAN: Thank you, my Lady.
Prime Minister, I ask questions on behalf of the
Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice Cymru, and my
questions relate to the UK Government's interactions
with the devolved administrations, and in particular the Welsh Government.

My first topic relates to the Eat Out to Help Out scheme, and you've already explained in your evidence that the devolved administrations were not consulted. Did the devolved administrations and specifically the Welsh Government have the option of opting out of the scheme, and if not, why not?
A. I'm not -- I'm not sure whether that was something that was ever raised with me, to be honest. I don't -I don't recall receiving any formal submission from the Welsh Government to do that. And if there is, I'd be happy to see it, but it's not something that I recall at the time. But, as I say, if you have it, I'd be happy 169
frequently do. So, if that was something that they wanted to raise, I'm sure they would have raised it through the normal channels that they had.
Q. Thank you.

My second topic relates to the funding of public health decisions in Wales during the pandemic, and I'm going to put two particular paragraphs that are contained within the first witness statement of the First Minister for Wales, Mr Mark Drakeford's statement.

This is exhibit INQ000273747, page 40.
Before we turn to Mr Drakeford's statement, it's important to set out two points of context that you've set out within your witness statement. You say in your statement that the UK Government provides most of the devolved administrations' funding, with quantum to be determined by the Barnett formula. And you also say that the UK Government provided the devolved administrations with an upfront funding guarantee in July 2021, and that was further uplifted on three occasions to enable the devolved administrations greater flexibility to respond to the pandemic.

With those important points of context in mind, and turning to Mr Drakeford's statement, at paragraph 136 of the statement, he says this, and I hope that it's on the screen in front of you:
to have a look at it, but I don't recall them ever making a formal submission to opt out of the scheme.
Q. Was that not indicative of the lack of consultation with them in the first place, though?
A. No, because -- I mean, as -- we have a devolution settlement where obviously the UK Government is able to make policy on matters that are reserved and devolved governments make matters on policy which is devolved without -- I wouldn't expect them to consult me on things that they were doing that were within their devolved competence -- every time they were making a budget decision -- ordinarily, again, they wouldn't expect to consult the UK Government on that. That's how our devolution settlement works. But, as I said, I don't recall them ever, after announcement of the scheme -- and as we've discussed there was almost a month between announcement and commencement -- them formally saying to me or the Treasury that they wanted to not participate in the scheme. I don't think they ever did that. Again, I don't recall them doing so.
Q. I think, Prime Minister, you've answered my second question on that topic. But did the Welsh Government have the opportunity, in your view, to raise concerns if they had concerns?
A. I think they always have an opportunity and they 170
"On 23 October 2020 the Welsh Firebreak came into effect. Had we had the confidence that the UK Government would provide the money needed to support people during the firebreak we probably would have implemented the lockdown [earlier]. However, it was hard for Wales to take the initiative because that meant we had to take the decision without financial support provided by the UK Government."

Now, I'm not asking about the merits of the firebreak or otherwise, but do you agree with Mr Drakeford's views in respect of the lack of financial support?
A. No, I don't. We have a constitutional settlement in the UK whereby funding for devolved administrations comes either through their -- you know, their standard bloc grant, their own tax raising powers, but then also the Barnett formula. So when the UK Government decides that it's increasing spending in areas of England that triggers what were called Barnett consequentials or extra funding for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, because they're obviously funded at a larger level than in England. That is the constitutional settlement as it works.

Because of the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, we actually did something different. Precisely to give 172
devolved administrations extra financial flexibility and security. We gave them money in advance of that being triggered by a decision that might be taken with respect to England, precisely because we were -- recognised that there would be some degree of iteration.

That was introduced in July. It's never been done before, it's unprecedented, the upfront funding guarantee. It was uplifted three times, the second time of which was -- or the first time of which was in early October, so just before this period. In total it was an extra $£ 5$ billion for Wales, which is a significant amount. So they had -- and they had total freedom to spend that money as they wished, and so that money was available beyond their existing -- again, they have tax raising powers and borrowing powers that they can use if they want to raise extra funding but, as I say, we had provided in an unprecedented fashion money in advance of it being constitutionally triggered to give them extra financial flexibility.
Q. I think, Mr Sunak, it was 9 October that the first uplift was implemented.
A. Yes.
Q. Is that right?
A. Yes, the upfront funding guarantee was introduced in July, it was then uplifted three times, the first of 173

Moving on, in a similar vein, Mr Drakeford goes on at paragraph 138 of his statement to say that October 2020 was a challenging month for intergovernmental relations, and then at paragraph 139 he concludes as follows:
"The Chancellor of the Exchequer refused to fund the consequences of a public health decision taken in Wales. That decision was, in my view, one of the most misguided decisions of the whole pandemic. It demonstrated that the Four Nations of the UK were to be treated differently by HM Treasury. It was, in effect, acting as a Treasury for England, not a Treasury for the UK. This was vividly illustrated when, within a few days of the Welsh firebreak a similar set of measures were adopted for England. Funds to support that cause of action were then released by the UK Treasury. Those funds were extended to Wales, but only because of decisions taken in response to the public health position in England, not because of the public health needs in Wales."

So the same question, Mr Sunak: do you agree with Mr Drakeford's views? Is he being fair?
A. No, I don't, it's the same answer I gave before, it precisely had funded extra money for Wales in early October in advance of that being triggered as is normal. 175
which was on 9 October, so just before these conversations.
Q. Thank you.
A. Again, that's funding -- just so we're clear, at that moment that would be the Welsh or Scottish or Northern Ireland governments receiving funding before it had been triggered through something that the UK Government had done. So the constitutional settlement doesn't normally work like that, but that was the government saying "We want you to have extra money, we don't know if actually this will ever come to pass, it may well, but we want to give you that extra certainty now". We'd never done that before. As I said, we did it and then we uplifted it three times, including just before this particular moment.
Q. And you've said in your evidence as well that Wales and indeed all of the devolved administrations had their own tax raising powers in addition to any of the additional funding that would have been made available by the UK Government?
A. Yes, I was giving an explanation more generally of how the funding settlements work, and borrowing powers as well. Again, there was a bit of a primer in there about how devolved funding works in general.
Q. Thank you.

174

And I think actually what the UK Government demonstrated through the pandemic, that there was incredible benefit to the people in Wales, and indeed Scotland and Northern Ireland, of being part of the United Kingdom, because the UK as an entity had the balance sheet strength to fund what were unprecedented interventions like the furlough scheme, which benefitted, I haven't got the exact numbers in front of me, but a considerable number of people in Wales and indeed in Scotland and Northern Ireland. That was just one of many UK measures implemented, indeed the increase in Universal Credit, much of the support elsewhere extended through the welfare system, all of which benefitted people in Wales. So that was the UK Government delivering for people across the UK. And, as I said, money was made available for Wales in advance of need because of the way that we structured the upfront funding guarantee. And again it was not ringfenced, it was up to the Welsh Government to decide how to spend that money.
MS GOWMAN: Thank you, Prime Minister, those are my questions.

Thank you, my Lady.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you, Ms Gowman.
Ms Mitchell.
Ms Mitchell is over there.
176

| Questions from MS MITCHELL KC | 1 |
| :--- | :--- |
| MS MITCHELL: Prime Minister, I appear as instructed by | 2 |
| Aamer Anwar \& Company on behalf of the Scottish Covid | 3 |
| Bereaved. | 4 |
| You've given evidence this morning in relation to | 5 |
| the difficult job of balancing economic consequences of | 6 |
| the pandemic with the decisions that have to be taken on | 7 |
| health by those who have to make those decisions. | 8 |
| Health obviously being a devolved matter, the | 9 |
| First Minister of Scotland was tasked with that | 10 |
| responsibility, and the funding of that matter rested | 11 |
| with the UK Government. | 12 |
| Can I have INQ000217057 up, please. | 13 |
| This is a letter from the then First Minister, | 14 |
| Nicola Sturgeon, to the then Prime Minister, | 15 |
| Boris Johnson. At page 1, just for the date, we get | 16 |
| that date on 23 September 2020, and can we go to the top | 17 |
| of page 2. | 18 |
| Now, I appreciate you won't have received this | 19 |
| letter directly unless it was forwarded on to you, but | 20 |
| what this says on that date, 23 September, is: | 21 |
| "And third, if it is not possible to reach | 22 |
| a four nations agreement on further restrictions with | 23 |
| associated support, what arrangements can be put in | 24 |
| place to ensure that devolved administrations are not | 25 |
| 177 |  | 177

much later than that, that the issue hadn't been raised and dealt with.
A. The reason I mention July is because July was the first time that the upfront funding guarantee was put in place. So it was as early as July, in fact, before these conversations, that the UK Government had decided to do something unprecedented, which is to provide extra funding to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in advance of that funding being triggered constitutionally through the Barnett formula, and then that funding was uplifted three times subsequently to that. The first of those uplifts was in October.
Q. Indeed, it would appear, though --
A. And so shortly -- I think shortly after this letter, by the look of things.
Q. Yes, indeed, it would appear though, notwithstanding what you've told us about, there were still concerns in relation to both the Scottish Government and also the Welsh Government in relation to this particular issue. What I'm saying is that after the arrangements had been put in place that had been made, were you aware of these further particular concerns in relation to the quandary that Scotland and Wales found itself in in questions of making decisions on public health that might require additional public funding, for example, to funding that
constrained in making what we judge to be essential public health decisions because we lack the financial flexibility to provide support to affected sectors or individuals?"

Now, you've already touched obviously on that issue with my learned friend, who has already asked you questions.

The first question I would like to ask you about this is: were you made aware, either by Mr Johnson or Mr Gove, as to the concerns the First Minister had at that time?
A. Yeah, I can't recall this specific letter.
Q. You may not recall the specific letter, but were you made aware of concerns either by Mr Johnson or Mr Gove about that particular concern of the First Minister?
A. Not in a specific sense. In general there were conversations throughout the pandemic about points of difference with the DAs, but I can't remember any specificity around those conversations at this particular time or more generally.
Q. Because I'm keen to explore the timescales that you've identified, because I think you mentioned July 2020 in your answer to my learned friend, and I'm wondering if July 2020 is the correct time? Because it seems both Mr Drakeford and Ms Sturgeon were expressing concerns, 178
might be different from that?
A. I'm not sure I agree with the sequencing. I thought the date, if you can flick back to the first page of the letter --
Q. That letter can be placed up on the screen.
A. If you just flick back to the ...
Q. Indeed.
A. Yes, so that was on 23 September. So actually two weeks after that there was an uplift --
Q. Indeed --
A. -- the upfront funding guarantee. So again I wasn't
familiar with this particular letter, but --
Q. Forgive me, Prime Minister --
A. -- subsequent to that, if there was a concern raised anyway there was action in early October to increase the funding to the Scottish Government beyond its, at that point, constitutional amount that would be -- would be due.

And, again, I'd make the same point that I made previously: we have an existing constitutional settlement --
Q. Indeed, Prime Minister, I'm not --
A. -- which obviously was -- we acted in an unprecedented fashion, but that is the constitutional settlement we have.

180
Q. I'm not looking for that analysis. What I'm looking for is specifically just to ascertain whether or not even an absence of the Barnett formula, so an absence of reacting to what was happening in the rest of the UK and uplifting the amount even in advance, I'm asking separately about the issue.

If I can give an example: I don't need this to be put up, but for the purposes of the Inquiry, INQ000235213, the statement of Nicola Sturgeon, paragraphs 102 and 103.

In her written evidence to this Inquiry, Mr Sunak, she states that the Scottish Government had pressed for a more generous approach to financial support for those required to self-isolate. In particular, the Scottish Government analysis showed that the labour impact of requiring self-isolation was unequal. People who were able to work from home were unlikely to lose income as a result of complying with self-isolation, but people who were not able to work from home were more likely to face a loss of income if they self-isolated and did not attend the workforce.

Firstly I would like to ask you about this: what conversations did you have with the Scottish Government in relation to whether a more generous approach to financial support from those who could not work from 181

So I think that is important.
Q. Mr Sunak --
A. You can't abstract away from it, I think that's the entire basis of how it works.
Q. Well, that is the basis of how it works, but I think the difficulty was that in a pandemic the First Minister was in charge of health and was asking the Prime Minister: what assistance can we get, rather than waiting for the rest of the UK, if we want to --
A. And my point was the upfront guarantee was put in place precisely so that they didn't have to wait. The whole point about it, it was funding in advance of that funding being triggered by something consequent down the line.
Q. Can I--
A. So it's precisely because of that that the upfront
guarantee was put in place --
Q. Can I --
A. -- and increased regularly.
Q. -- return to my question, which was: what conversations did you have with the Scottish Government in relation to the issue that was raised about the unequal labour impact of requiring self-isolation to those who could work from home and those who couldn't?
A. You know, I don't recall any specific conversations.
home but required to self-isolate?
A. I just -- you said you wanted to think about this relationship absent the Barnett formula.
Q. Yes.
A. I genuinely think that's hard to do. The Barnett formula is the way that UK Government spending in reserved areas translates into -- into devolved areas translates into incremental spending in the devolved administrations. It's hard to abstract away from that; that is the entire basis of our constitutional financial settlement.
Q. Indeed, but --
A. So -- and we operated it in a way that was more generous than it normally works in order to provide extra funding in advance to the devolved administrations for them to use as they wanted, on top of their own ability, if they wanted, to raise more money or indeed borrow money. They have flexibilities that were available to them to do that. And actually, in the Scottish Government's case, on more than one occasion with the Barnett formula consequentials that they received from the UK Government they were able to implement policies that were more generous than those that had been implemented in England, because they were obviously making different choices or that money was -- enabled them to do that. 182

Most of the financial engagement with the DAs happens via the chief secretary to the Treasury, and there's a standard finance ministers' quadrilateral that happens at that level between the DA finance ministers and the chief secretary. That happened, as I believe, regularly during the pandemic, which would be the forum for those discussions.
Q. Were you aware that such analysis was done?
A. As I said, more generally the UK Government did implement a scheme for self-isolation payments, and right at the early part of the pandemic I introduced a scheme to support those who were self-employed --
Q. Yes, but I'm asking --
A. -- considerably.
Q. -- about the specific issue of inequality between those who could work from home who self-isolated and those who couldn't. Were you aware of that inequality and were you aware of that problem?
A. I think it's, I guess, self-evident that there would be an inequality between those things.
Q. And --
A. I would just -- by definition if you can work from home, obviously you would be less impacted by self-isolation requirements.
Q. Was there anything done in that regard to try and 184
equalise that inequality?
A. As I said, we introduced extra payments for people who were self-isolating, and we obviously introduced considerable economic support more generally for people's jobs and livelihoods which, as I touched on in my evidence earlier, was disproportionately focused on the most vulnerable and has been demonstrated to have achieved that aim in helping those on the lowest incomes the most.
Q. Finally, in your evidence you have indicated that you reflected upon your time as Chancellor and you've spoken of lessons learned and reflections. We know that prior to this pandemic we've not heard any evidence of prior economic pandemic planning, despite it being highest risk on the National Risk Register. What provisions do you think should be put in place to allow the devolved administrations, in the event of the next pandemic, to access additional funding to allow schemes -for example, such as furlough and those that we've talked about -- to be put in place when they're required in those parts of the UK but not required in England, ie when the Barnett formula isn't triggered?
A. I think that speaks to our overall constitutional and devolution settlement, and I think it's quite hard to completely unpick that. It may speak to -- you know, it 185
economic decisions that I made, and no doubt I will be back to give extensive evidence on all of those. This was about decision-making structures and processes, but with regard to that and the devolved administration, again as I've said, the chief secretary to the Treasury is the one that maintains the quadrilateral framework of finance ministers. That's always been the case, I think generally has worked well, worked well when I was CST, and I think the upfront funding guarantee was a good innovation, and I'm glad we put it in place.
MS MITCHELL: I may have questions for next time.
My Lady, I'm obliged.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you, Ms Mitchell.
Mr Menon.
Mr Menon's over there, Prime Minister.

## Questions from MR MENON KC

MR MENON: Good afternoon, Mr Sunak. I ask questions on behalf of a number of children's rights organisations, and I want to return to the topic of the campaign for free meals for poorer school children during the summer holidays.

Lee Cain, the former Downing Street director of communications, told the Inquiry that the government's initial resistance in 2020 to Marcus Rashford's campaign for free meals for poorer school children during the
A. Well, obviously this module is not concerned with the 186
summer holidays was a "huge blunder in that hungry children were not the right place to start showing public spending restraint from a moral or political standpoint".

Given the government's subsequent U-turn on this issue, do you agree that Lee Cain was right about that?
A. Well, you know, I can't remember the exact decision-making around that in any great detail other than to know that ultimately the government spent, I think, about half a billion pounds over the course of the pandemic funding free school meals, and then I put in place as Chancellor a permanent uplift in the provision for vulnerable children called the Holiday Activities and Food programme, which is funded quite considerably to provide not just food but enriching activities for children during holiday times, obviously focused on the most disadvantaged children, and that is now a permanent feature post-pandemic of the support in place for vulnerable children in our country.

And again, I just go back to what I said previously about our overall and my overall approach during the pandemic was very much focused on those on the lowest incomes and as a result they rightly received disproportionately more help and benefitted the most.
Q. So are you saying that it was somebody else in 188
government who was initially opposed to funding this, rather than you, the Chancellor of the Exchequer?
A. I can't recall the individual discussions.
Q. What was your view in 2020 on this matter initially?
A. Actually I genuinely can't --
Q. Can't remember?
A. I genuinely can't recall the exact discussions. In the end we did ultimately fund it. There was a discussion about term time and out of term time, because obviously those were different things, one hadn't been impacted by the pandemic. Ultimately the government did fund quite considerably the free school meals programme and replaced it with -- not replaced it, added to it with something more permanent in the Holiday Activities and Food programme.
Q. Mr Keith -- the very last topic that he asked you about -- raised a further meeting on the same topic a year later in June 2021. Now, I'm afraid I didn't understand your answer to his question, it may just be me, but can I ask you this: in June 2021, did you personally oppose free meals for poorer school children during the summer holidays in June 2021?
A. I can't remember at what point we funded instead the Holiday Activities and Food programme because, as we were coming out of the pandemic, unsurprisingly, things 189
they have new babies. The value of those vouchers was also increased on a permanent basis.
Q. Mr Sunak, I'm trying not to interrupt you, but l've got limited time. Can I just clarify this matter, please: you told Mr Keith that you never said anything along the lines of "Good working people pay for their children to eat and don't want freeloaders"; do you recall a meeting at which anybody in the government expressed such a sentiment?
A. No.
Q. So as far as you're concerned it was never said, you don't recall it ever being said by anybody in the UK Government?
A. No.
Q. Can we at least agree on this finally, then: that if anybody had expressed such a sentiment about the parents of poorer school children, that would be a reprehensible thing to say in the circumstances of a pandemic that's caused so much economic turmoil?
A. Well, it's precisely because I knew that the pandemic was causing particular turmoil for those who were on the lowest incomes that our support deliberately and specifically helped them the most and benefitted them the most, because I thought that was the right thing to do, and I think we should be judged especially on our 191
that were temporary were being removed more generally. All the -- whether it was furlough, whether it was for the self-employed, I mean, it was reasonable not to be able to sustain -- you have to remember we spent almost $£ 400$ billion, or more accurately borrowed $£ 400$ billion. It was one of the most generous and comprehensive support packages put in place anywhere in the world, it disproportionately did benefit the most vulnerable, and actually poverty actually fell during this period as a result.

But it's clear that that's not sustainable forever, so as the pandemic ended and we returned to more normal life, it's reasonable that we returned to a more normal state. But actually, when it came to the situation of free school meals, even though the pandemic support ended, more permanent extra support was put in place. So the provision of meals and indeed activities today is greater and more generously funded than it was before the pandemic, as a result of changes that were made.
Q. Mr Sunak, you've talked --
A. That's through the Holiday Activities and Food programme, and indeed the increase in what are called the Healthy Start vouchers, which are vouchers that are given I think to expectant or new mothers to -- for them to use on fresh fruit and milk and things like that when 190
actions and our actions in this regard was that the support was in place to help the most vulnerable.

Now, of course people would always like you to do more, always like you to do things slightly differently, but in the round I think it's hard to argue with the proposition that the support we put in place was incredibly comprehensive and, in terms of its scale, generous by international standards and the evidence is clear that it disproportionately, rightly, benefitted those on the lowest incomes.
MR MENON: Well, I'm sure that will be explored in a future module. Thank you, Mr Sunak.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you, Mr Menon.
Mr Friedman.
Mr Friedman is just behind you to your right, Prime Minister, but if you could make sure you keep your voice into the microphone. Thank you.

## Questions from MR FRIEDMAN KC

MR FRIEDMAN: Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I act for four national disabled people's organisations, and we also want to ask you about those proposed regulations in the winter of 2020 to prevent care workers moving between care homes and other placements to stop the spread of the virus.

The issue is also dealt with in the statement of 192

Helen Whately, then Minister for Social Care, and of course brought back into that role by you as Prime Minister. We need not go to it directly, but for the record it's at INQ000273897.

Now, Minister Whately deals with the problem that these proposals sought to fix: the significant number of people worked in more than one care setting, a balance was needed between stopping that happening and protecting people in a profession where, as Whately describes it in paragraph 229 of her statement, staff worked part-time, on zero hours contract, and the majority of that workforce were women and working for often low levels of pay.

Now, we've heard your answers to Ms Morris
King's Counsel, who asked you questions for the Covid bereaved families, including that you were not directly involved in these decisions, and there's no criticism on that, Prime Minister, but may we just put the position of the Minister for Social Care to you and just get your reflections on it.

First she'd advocated for a furlough scheme and then a compensation scheme for workers who, under these regulations, were going to be mandated effectively not to work; and that's at paragraphs 236 to 239 of her statement. In essence, cutting it short, HMT considered 193 understaffing, but no additional funding to support not working, and no regulations happened. Instead there was just voluntary guidance to employers.

So, from a Treasury point of view -- and I'm asking you just to reflect on it now and assist the Chair -was this voluntary approach a safe enough approach to the movement of staff between care jobs when it was known that there was a continuing risk that they could not afford to do otherwise?
A. Again, I'm not obviously familiar with all the policy debates, so it's -- I can't sit here and make a pronouncement on what the right policy would have been. I think that would be the opposite of a good decision-making process. I can tell you that across all the different health and public services interventions that we made, a cumulative total of about $£ 150$ billion was spent. So I think you've heard evidence from the chief executive of the NHS, the government did provide the NHS in particular with the emergency funds needed; I've talked about the billions that were provided to local authorities who are obviously responsible for social care as well.

So if you're saying that: how some of that money was used should have been better prioritised for this versus 195

## So in short, some funding to deal with

these positions but did not approve either furlough or some further compensation scheme; instead, as you say in your evidence this afternoon, it proposed a financial scheme to increase the supply of care workers.

So, Mr Sunak, looking back at the situation now, and of course thinking forward as Prime Minister, why reject any kind of furlough scheme or any compensation fund and instead prefer an alternative proposal to increase the supply of labour that didn't actually target the specific problem of staff movement?
A. Again, I'm afraid I'm not sure I can add much to my previous evidence. I wasn't directly involved in these conversations, I'm not familiar with the various arguments that were being deliberated and policy discussions, so it's very hard for me to speculate or comment beyond what l've already said and my review of the materials obviously three years later.
Q. Well, just looking forward, then, let me just try and help you if it's fair to do so.

We know that there was an alternative workplace capacity fund, and it was for $£ 120$ million, and it came in from January 2020 to supply additional labour, but no payment to not work and ultimately -- the evidence is there -- no regulations introduced to stop movement between homes and other settings.
other things, perhaps. But, again, I'm not familiar with the specific policy proposal, why it was deemed to be ineffective at the time, why it was not supported by key system partners, not just the Treasury but more broadly; my understanding was there were operational issues with it as well, having reviewed the materials. Clearly I just -- I can't sit here and speculate on what the right answer is to something that I was not involved in or have no intimate detail about.
MR FRIEDMAN: Thank you, my Lady.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you, Mr Friedman.
Mr Thomas.
I'm afraid Mr Thomas is right over by that wall, Prime Minister, so ...

## Questions from PROFESSOR THOMAS KC

PROFESSOR THOMAS: Prime Minister Sunak, Leslie Thomas, and I'm instructed by Saunders Law and I represent FEHMO, the Federation of Ethnic Minority Healthcare Organisations. You remember them, those are the very people we were clapping for on Thursday evenings at 8 pm.

So, some context for you: the Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, told this Inquiry that it was entirely foreseeable that there would be disparities in health outcomes during the pandemic because of 196
historically known structural inequalities.
I have three short questions for you.
One, with your Eat Out to Help Out scheme specifically, please tell us what were the specific measures or considerations in its design to address the vulnerabilities of ethnic minority workers in the hospitality sectors and other sectors?
A. I'm sorry, do you want to do one question at a time?
Q. Yes.
A. Well, as I touched on earlier, it was precisely because the millions of people who worked in that industry were disproportionately from vulnerable groups -- lower paid, people moving off welfare, people working part-time, women, ethnic minorities -- that I thought as a matter of social justice those jobs were incredibly important to focus on saving, because all the evidence that we were seeing, and talking to businesses, was that there was a real fear that they wouldn't be able to protect those jobs and people would have to be let go --
Q. Sorry, Prime Minister, forgive me for cutting across you, because time is short and I know that you wouldn't be trying to talk me down on the clock.

My question was very specific. My question was very specific: what were the specific measures or considerations in its design to address the 197

We can agree this, can't we, albeit in hindsight: your Eat Out to Help Out scheme further exacerbated structural inequalities by placing low paid workers, such as those who I represent, back into an increased risk of infection? We can agree that, can't we?
A. No, I don't agree that. These workplaces were safe and deemed to be safe for everybody as a result of the Covid secure guidance that they had to comply with as a matter of re-opening, and that was, as I said, determined by the overall re-opening plan, and actually what it did was protect those people's livelihoods, because the risk was those people wouldn't have a job to go to if we hadn't done something to try and help make sure that their businesses were operating, and I think that would have had devastating socioeconomic and health consequences for those low paid people if the job that they depended on disappeared, and the consequences for them and their family of not having a job would be incredibly significant, and I want to do everything I can to prevent that from happening and to save their jobs.
Q. In the planning of the stages of the Eat Out to Help Out scheme, what were the assessments made regarding the potential risk of increased transmission within multigenerational households, particularly those from
vulnerabilities of ethnic minority workers in the hospitality sector? That was my question.
LADY HALLETT: Just before you answer, Mr Sunak. Mr Thomas, I think that comment was inappropriate. So please just answer the question, Prime Minister, and ignore the reference to your deliberately talking Mr Thomas out.
A. Thank you, my Lady.

I think that would be better addressed in the government's guidance to the sector which I referred to earlier, which was considerable, 55 pages long, and supplemented by the 100 pages of guidance issued by UKHospitality, the industry trade association, which if you review it had very detailed guidance that I understand was put together with advice from Public Health England, who are the experts on this, about how to make sure that workforces of all ethnicities were protected at work, and the measures such as screens, changing shift patterns, use of different entrance and exits, are all some practical things that I can recall. But that's how that consideration was properly taken care of, not just in the hospitality industry but across the entire economy and the sector guidance that was published in conjunction with Public Health England, who are the experts on exactly that topic.
PROFESSOR THOMAS: Let's move on. 198
black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, as a result of individuals returning to work in the hospitality sector, and did you use equality impact assessments to assess this risk?
A. I think l've addressed this before, and it would be the same answer. It had already -- Eat Out to Help Out was designed in the context of the safe lifting of NPIs that had been signed off and agreed as part of the May plan. There was considerable Covid secure guidance put in place to safely re-open indoor hospitality, and this scheme operated within all of those constraints, within that guidance that had been previously signed off, approved and implemented.
PROFESSOR THOMAS: My Lady, thank you.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you, Mr Thomas.
Mr Metzer.
Mr Metzer's over that way, Prime Minister.
THE WITNESS: Thank you.

## Questions from MR METZER KC

MR METZER: Mr Sunak, I have a small number of questions on behalf of the Long Covid groups.

Given the significant multifaceted economic costs resulting directly from Long Covid -- which the Covid-19 Taskforce had estimated at between $£ 158$ million and $£ 316$ million between the period March 2020 and 200

March 2021 for workplace absenteeism due to Long Covid alone -- would you agree that the fact that a significant number of people would suffer from long-term consequences of Covid-19 meant that Long Covid was a relevant consideration in your advice as Chancellor to government on policy decisions to limit transmission of Covid-19?
A. I touch on this briefly in my witness statement, you know, I don't -- as I said, the Treasury participated in a Long Covid forum that had been put together across government, and I think actually there was not a huge amount known about it particularly early on, so I don't recall it being a particular feature of the advice I was receiving or getting from the Chief Medical Officer and others, probably because we'd -you know, no one understood it well at that moment in time.
Q. Well, Prime Minister, you do touch upon it I think in one paragraph in your witness statement. But in November 2020, the OBR economic and fiscal outlook reports -- we don't need to go there, but it's INQ000114451 at page 116 -- referred to the increased need for spending in disability benefits as a result of increases in labour market inactivity as a result of the pandemic which could be directly related to the virus 201
multifaceted -- and l've given explanation of the different transmission channels for scarring to occur -is something that was already incorporated into the economic forecasting from the OBR, the Bank of England and others, because the prevailant view amongst most economic experts was that there would be scarring impacts as a result of the pandemic.

As I said, there are different transmission mechanisms for those, one of them is the labour market, of which this is a subset. So I think there are a variety of reasons for scarring --
Q. Yes.
A. -- estimates of it changed over time, no doubt this was one of them and it was factored -- the scarring impact was factored into all the forecasting that was done.
Q. So, Prime Minister, do you agree specifically in relation to Long Covid a direct health impact, long-term impact arising in the context of workplace absenteeism because of there being known growing numbers of Long Covid sufferers?
A. I haven't seen the precise evidence that links the rise in economic inactivity that we have seen precisely to Long Covid. I think actually the surveys that have been done and the evidence and advice that I saw demonstrated that it was far more multifaceted than that, and there 203
A. I think more generally the concept of scarring, which is 202
wasn't one simple explanation, which is why the problem is actually not so straightforward to reverse, although we are making progress

So I don't recall there being a direct relationship or someone quantifying the specific contribution of Long Covid to the rise in economic inactivity. It seems plausible to assume it is playing a part, but everything I've seen suggests that there are a number of factors that have led to the rise in economic inactivity and the scarring impact that we've seen.
Q. But would you agree that the impact of Long Covid would be particularly relevant to policy decisions taken at times when there's high prevalence of Covid-19?
A. Again, with regard to economic inactivity or the impact on scarring, it is one of a number of factors that have led to a rise in economic inactivity is probably what the evidence suggests. But, I mean -- so, as I said, there's a range of reasons for the rise in economic inactivity, not all attributable to Long Covid, so --
Q. No, but --
A. -- policymakers have to consider all of them, not one on its own.
Q. No, but including Long Covid you accept?
A. It seems plausible to assume that it is a contributing factor, that I can't sit here and tell you that I've

204
seen something that explains exactly what it is contributing to or how much of the rise in inactivity that we've seen is down to that. I haven't seen any precise --
Q. All right.
A. -- on that, so I just simply can't tell you how much of a feature it is.
Q. But we do know that there's been no advice from -- we haven't seen any advice from Her Majesty's Treasury warning of the economic costs of Long Covid born from high prevalence of Covid-19. How, if at all, did the economic costs from Long Covid inform your advice to the Prime Minister, and are you able to give an example?
A. No. I mean, as I said, I think more generally the impact of Covid on the labour market was misestimated by most people because the predominant fear throughout this entire period was significant unemployment, which thankfully didn't manifest itself in the end, but the predominant labour market fear from all economists was about the rise in unemployment that would happen as the furlough scheme was wound down --
Q. Yes.
A. -- over time.
Q. Yes.
A. What was underappreciated was the rise, the subsequent 205
Q. Yes.
A. -- the plan as it was laid out, delayed in one place to accommodate some concerns.
Q. Yes.
A. But it was put together with the input of the medical advice.
Q. Mr Sunak, finally this: do you accept that the economic cost of workplace absenteeism in circumstances where there was a rising number of persons who were suffering long-term sickness due to Long Covid, it was important that that be a feature of Her Majesty's Treasury's advice on NPIs and therefore, if that was taken into account, then that became -- those increased costs were an accepted trade-off for keeping the economy open?
A. I'm not sure there was a precise quantification or understanding of the potential costs from that particular reason for rising economic inactivity and, as I've said previously, I think the rise in economic inactivity that -- it was not something that was foreseen by most economic commentators. The reasons for it are still being bottomed out, but are almost certainly multifaceted and don't exclusively focus on one area.

There's obviously an economic cost from economic inactivity, that's why the government is investing --
rise in economic inactivity. It was underappreciated by all including the Treasury, but all economic commentators I think, of which, as I said, there are a number of reasons for that.
Q. Sorry, Prime Minister, can I just cut across you, please. I'm very sorry.

In summer 2021 the government started planning for high prevalence of Covid-19, which meant the government was accepting there will be more cases of Covid-19 and therefore as a result Long Covid.

Were the increased costs from more cases of Long Covid an accepted trade-off for keeping the economy open?
A. I don't think the conversation was ever that precise about that particular thing. I think in my recollection of 2021 was an exit roadmap that was put together in February, extensive engagement and discussion with our public health advisers and Chief Scientific Adviser, CMO. I think both of them have said that they feel like that exit roadmap is something that the government got -- you know, we all did very well. It had five-week periods, time to make a step, review data, adjust as needed. Again, like the May roadmap, it was delayed at one stage. All of that was informed with medical and health advice, all of it, and we followed that -206
and has been for a while -- in reducing it across a whole range of different initiatives, particularly in the health space but also through DWP to support those who can work to work, and that work has been ongoing now for a long time. I started it, the current Chancellor's continued it. There's considerable funding in place to support people into work and reverse economic inactivity but, as I said, it's multifaceted
LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much.
MR METZER: Thank you, Prime Minister.
Thank you, my Lady.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you, Mr Metzer.
Right, lastly, Mr Jacobs. Where have you gone?
MR JACOBS: At the back again, my Lady.
LADY HALLETT: Ah. Behind the pillar, Prime Minister.

## Questions from MR JACOBS

MR JACOBS: Mr Sunak, my questions on behalf of the Trades Union Congress are regarding financial support for self-isolation, the issue of those on the lowest income facing two weeks of self-isolation on the $£ 95$ of statutory sick pay, or indeed nothing if they are ineligible.

Firstly, is it accurate to describe that the Treasury was urged from many sides to take greater action on financial support for self-isolation?

208
A. Well, the first thing to say is that the Treasury did take action, in my first budget that I delivered as Chancellor in March we made changes to the operation of the statutory sick pay scheme, so that it operated from day one rather than from day four as was normal, that it covered asymptomatic self-isolators, and we put in place a half a billion pounds hardship fund distributed to local authorities, particularly designed to pick up those hard cases and make sure that those who needed to could get extra support.

So those were the decisions that were taken in March. It later became a feature of discussions, I think at the tail end of the summer there were some conversations between Number 10 and others, and then there was quite an extensive set of deliberations leading to the announcement in September of the $£ 500$ payment for -- to support people to self-isolate.
Q. Mr Sunak, you've described various decisions that were taken. My question, straightforwardly, was a slightly different one: is it accurate to describe that the Treasury was urged from many sides to take greater action on financial support for self-isolation?
A. I think it's a fair thing to say that on every single topic there is always someone urging the Treasury to do more and spend more. I think that is a universal view. 209
get tested in low socioeconomic groups. Rishi reacted strongly against that and said basically just stop the social interactions. For Rishi it is all about personal responsibility and get the state out."

Then on 7 September 2020:
"Chancellor blocking all notion of paying to get
people to isolate, despite all the evidence that this will be needed."

Are those fair characterisations of your position?
A. No, and they're not borne out by the evidence either, because in August we introduced a scheme, a pilot scheme in high incidence areas with payments for people to self-isolate, and in September we announced a national scheme, and those conversations were happening throughout August and September more generally, as far as I remember and having reviewed the evidence. So the proof is that we did introduce a scheme to do that, but like on most things my job is to scrutinise, it's right that there are debate over policy, and that was the same on this policy like many others.
Q. They certainly were fair characterisations, weren't they, Mr Sunak, for the first six months following self-isolation as a key measure from March 2020 until the end of September when the scheme was brought in, for that period of time it was an issue that was

I could -- you could pick any single policy and that would be the case, including this, but that would apply equally to any other thing that I did in the pandemic.
Q. Whilst some action was taken, and we'll come on to that, is it right realistically to say that you personally, Mr Sunak, and the Treasury were extremely resistant to any significant scheme of support?
A. No, I was sceptical that it would make a significant difference to the levels of people self-isolating, which was the purported basis for the scheme, and it's entirely reasonable for those conversations to happen and they did happen, but ultimately a scheme was introduced. It was introduced in September, it provided a $£ 500$ payment, and it was introduced as a result of those deliberations in government, testing propositions, and I think that is again a sign of a process that is working. Ultimately this is taxpayers' money, it's right that there are conversations that happen to make sure that it's being spent in a way that is effective, and this was just one of those many conversations that happened.
Q. There are a number of references in Sir Patrick's diaries, Mr Sunak, to your personal position, and by way of example, 27 July 2020 he writes:
"Dido pushed to get financial support for people to 210
unaddressed, wasn't it?
A. No, that's again not a fair characterisation. I took action on self-isolation in the first budget that I delivered on 11 March, and this didn't then become a particular topic of debate until the end of the summer, and that's unsurprising because that was when the test, track and trace scheme had been set up at a proper scale, at which point this became a more relevant consideration. It just wasn't relevant earlier because (a) we were in a national lockdown and (b) we didn't have test, track and trace up and running with the testing volumes to make this a kind of mass consideration. When it came up at the end of the summer we went through it, as we would with any other policy. It -- all the evidence at the time and subsequently has not concluded -- people have many opinions on this, but no one was able to produce any clear evidence that higher payments would make a difference to compliance rates. Indeed, there were many other reasons people weren't complying which had nothing to do with their need to work, and it was all about boredom, loneliness, going shopping, reducing symptoms, misunderstanding of the rules.

So it wasn't ever clear to me that this was the primary reason, and indeed all the evidence of what we 212
did demonstrated that it didn't make a significant difference, if any, to compliance rates. But we did introduce it, as I said, £500 in September, after a pilot study that was done in August.
Q. Mr Sunak, before I move on to my next question, you say that it wasn't relevant in the earlier period. For those on lower incomes who kept the country going, working in food processing plants, in transport, in social care, through lockdown, it was highly relevant, wasn't it?
A. And there was considerable support in place for the most vulnerable, as l've documented in my previous answers. Not only did we put in place a half a billion pound hardship fund for local authorities specifically to help people who most needed it, we temporarily increased Universal Credit which was worth $£ 1,000$ a year, we increased again significantly the local housing allowance for 1.5 million of the most vulnerable families worth $£ 600$ a year, and we had a self-employment scheme so that all those who were self-employed were benefitting from considerable support whether or not they were still able to work.

So there was considerable support in place for everybody and, as l've pointed to, the evidence is clear that it did disproportionately benefit the most 213
other alternative that was suggested at the time was DWP, but it was clear from all the advice that I'd received and the department themselves that that wasn't practical, not least because it would have required primary legislation, I think, for DWP to have the ability to make payments like that and they simply didn't have a delivery apparatus, unlike local authorities, who had local welfare assistance schemes and were well placed to know their most vulnerable people, and also local authorities did have access to all the same underlying benefits data as DWP.

So, look, none of these are perfect by all means, but I don't think there was a credible alternative to local authorities doing this, and --
Q. I think, sorry, l'm running very short of time.

LADY HALLETT: I think you've run out of time, I'm afraid, Mr Jacobs.
MR JACOBS: Ah. In that case, I'd better leave it there. Thank you, my Lady.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much.
MR KEITH: My Lady, that concludes the oral evidence.
LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much.
Thank you very much, Prime Minister. I appreciate that -- well, I doubt there's ever an easy time for you to come along here to give evidence, but I appreciate 215
vulnerable and those on the lowest incomes. My point was that this became a more significant consideration in terms of the scale because of test, track and trace, so this had an ability to impact the national progress of the pandemic because we were now testing at such a scale; and as soon as that became a conversation, test track and trace was set up, we engaged with all those conversations and implemented a scheme in September which provided $£ 500$ of support.
Q. On that scheme introduced in September providing $£ 500$ of support, it ultimately had very, very low take-up, didn't it?
A. Yes, my understanding is around a fifth of people took it up.
Q. In terms of the reasons for that, it was a local authority administered scheme, was it foreseen that doing it that way would be cumbersome and frankly inaccessible with many local authorities each implementing their own individual scheme in a slightly different way?
A. Now, look, that's always the challenge with doing things by local authority, they will be slightly different even if there's national guidance. I'm not sure there was an alternative, so it was accepted it wouldn't be perfect but it was better than doing nothing. The only 214
it's difficult this particular week, and thank you for your help.
THE WITNESS: Thank you for having me.

## (The witness withdrew)

LADY HALLETT: That completes, as Mr Keith says, the oral evidence for Module 2. The oral evidence is, I have to repeat and emphasise, just one part of the process. It's an important part, of course it is, but so is the written material, that is also important, so also are the submissions of core participants, and I will consider all that evidence before I reach any conclusions, and I'll hear the submissions of core participants on Wednesday and Thursday and also, because of the tight timetable, give them an extended time to submit any written submissions to supplement the oral submissions.

So I shall return to Module 2 on Wednesday.
Thank you all.
MR KEITH: Thank you, my Lady.
( 4.33 pm )
(The hearing adjourned until 10 am
on Wednesday, 13 December 2023)

## INDEX

MR RISHI SUNAK (sworn) ..... 1PAGE
Questions from LEAD COUNSEL TO THE INQUIRY ... 1Questions from MS MORRIS KC163
Questions from MS GOWMAN ..... 169
Questions from MS MITCHELL KC ..... 177
Questions from MR MENON KC ..... 187
Questions from MR FRIEDMAN KC ..... 192
Questions from PROFESSOR THOMAS KC ..... 196
Questions from MR METZER KC ..... 200
Questions from MR JACOBS ..... 208

|  | 1,077 [1] 147/6 | 158 million [1] | 189/18 189/20 189/22 | 200/25 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| LADY HALLETT: |  |  |  | 79/9 |
| [29] 1/3 62/19 62/23 | 110/23 119/4 | 16 January [1] | 2022 [3] 2/22 2/2 | 3 rd [1] 109/1 |
| 75/14 88/7 88/21 |  |  |  | 4 |
| 107/10 107/13 107/17 |  | $\begin{array}{\|c\|} \hline 16 \text { July } \\ \text { 119/24 } \end{array}$ | $\begin{gathered} 2023 \text { [3] } \\ 216 / 22 \end{gathered}$ |  |
| 131/1 163/1 163/3 | 1.5 million [1] 213/18 <br> 1.55 [1] 107/13 | $\begin{array}{\|l\|} \hline 119 / 24 \\ 16 \text { March [3] 23/20 } \end{array}$ | $\begin{array}{\|l\|} \hline 216 / 22 \\ \text { 20th [6] 59/9 62/12 } \end{array}$ | $\begin{aligned} & 4 \text { June [1] 109/1 } \\ & 4 \text { May [2] } 86 / 21 \end{aligned}$ |
| 163/7 168/25 169/4 | $1.55 \text { pm [1] } 107 / 16$ | 49/11 52/22 |  | $87 / 21$ |
| 169/6 176/23 187/13 |  |  | 74/1 | 4 Novemb |
| 192/13 196/11 198/3 | $23 / 2 \text { 23/5 23/7 23/9 }$ | $54 / 19 \text { 59/9 59/14 }$ | 21 May [1] 93/11 | 157/7 |
| 200/15 208/9 208/12 | 31/4 34/14 34/18 37/3 | 62/12 64/9 66/20 67/2 | 21 September [2] | 4.33 pm [1] 216/20 |
|  | 37/6 41/12 47/20 | 67/13 67/16 | 147/14 148/4 | 40 [1] 171/10 |
|  | 111/4 115/6 123/1 | 17 [2] 86/25 | 21st [2] 70/2 7 | 400 billion [2] 190/5 |
| 192/19 196/10 | 132/7 132/11 142/9 | 18 months [1] 14/22 | 22 [2] 13/9 120/3 | 190/5 |
| MR JACOBS: [3] | 142/11 160/3 209/14 | 182 [1] 74/6 | 22 April [1] 31/22 | 491 [1] 164/13 |
| 208/14 208/17 215/18 | 10 am [1] 216/21 | 187 [1] 74/6 | 22 July [2] 119/13 | 5 |
| MR KEITH: [15] 1/4 | 10 February [1] 6 | 18th [10] 49/15 49/18 54/21 59/9 59/16 |  | 5 |
| 1/8 62/17 62/25 75/19 | $10$ | $\begin{aligned} & 54 / 2159 / 9 \\ & 62 / 1267 / 1 \end{aligned}$ | $\begin{array}{\|c\|} \hline 22 \text { Jun } \\ 119 / 2 \end{array}$ | 5 January [1] 16 |
| 88/11 88/24 107/9 | $10.30 \mathrm{am}[1] 1 / 2$ | $73 / 373 / 24$ | $229 \text { [1] 193/10 }$ | 5 June [1] 138/7 |
| 107/12 107/18 131/3 |  | $19 \text { [9] 17/11 }$ | $\text { 22nd [1] } 148 / 5$ | 5 pm [3] 57/21 62/1 |
| 162/25 163/2 215/21 | $100 \text { pages [1] 198/11 }$ | $169 / 10 \text { 201/4 201/7 }$ | $23 \text { [1] } 12 / 23$ | 62/2 |
| 216/19 | 100 pages of [1] | 204/13 205/11 206/8 | 23 June [1] 9 | 500 [5] 209/16 |
| MR MENON: [2] | 118/15 | 206/9 | 23 March [2] | 210/14 213/3 214 |
| 187/17 192/ | 102 [1] | 19 Mar | 62/3 | 214/10 |
| M | 103 [1] 181/10 | 68/12 | 23 Oct | 53 [1] 74/6 |
|  | 11 [2] 17/13 23/ | 19 Septembe | 172/1 | 55 pages [2] 118/13 |
| 169/8 176/20 | 11 April [1] 105/3 | 147/4 147/7 | 23 Se | 198/ |
| MS MITCHELL | 11 December 2023 | 19th [5] | 177/21 180/8 | [1] 1 |
| 177/2 187/11 | [1] | 69 | 23 September 2020 | 5th [1] 97/16 |
| MS MORRIS: [ | 11 | 1 m [1] |  | 6 |
| 163/13 168/2 |  | 2 |  | 6 August [2] 119/13 |
| PROFESSOR | $116 \text { [1] 201/22 }$ | 2 June [1] 107 | $239 \text { [1] }$ | 120/8 |
| THOMAS: [3] 196/16 | $12 \text { [1] } 13 / 12$ | 2 metres [2] 108/1 |  | 6 June 2020 |
| 198/25 200/14 | 12 Octob | $119 / 4$ |  | 38/25 |
| THE WITNESS: [4] | $152 / 11152 / 14$ | 2 million [1] 1 | $24 \text { [1] 108/13 }$ | 600 [1] |
| 169/3 169/5 200/18 | $12.05 \text { [1] 62/19 }$ | 2-metre [9] 28/17 | $24 \text { June [1] } 1$ | 6th [1] 97/18 |
| 216/3 |  | 107/18 108/3 109/ | 25 March [1] |  |
| ' | 120 millio | 109/16 109/19 109/2 | 25 October 2022 |  |
|  |  | 110/23 122/18 | 2/24 | 7 May [1] 90/20 |
|  | 12th [5] 59/8 64/8 | 20 June [1] 99/13 | $257 \text { [2] 112/21 114/7 }$ | 7 September 2020 [ |
| 'I'd [2] 27/15 27/23 | $64 / 1766 / 16 \text { 66/17 }$ | $20 \text { March [1] 64/9 }$ | $26[2] 83 / 2083 / 22$ | 211/5 |
| 'In [1] 81/16 | 64/17 66/16 66/17 <br> 13 December 2023 | 20 October [7] | $26 \text { August [1] 126/10 }$ | 72 [1] 13 |
| 'no [1] 39/7 | 13 December 2023 $\text { [1] } 216 / 22$ | $\begin{array}{\|l\|} \hline 20 \text { October [7] } \\ \text { 149/16 153/25 154/6 } \end{array}$ | 26 August [1] 126/10 <br> 27 August 2022 [1] | 75 [2] 13/8 49/23 |
| 'particularly [1] 84/6 <br> 'The [3] 31/6 34/2 | [1] 216/22 $161 / 2$ | $154 / 11 \text { 154/13 155/13 }$ | $\begin{aligned} & 27 \text { August } 2022 \text { [ } \\ & 27 / 12 \end{aligned}$ | 8 |
| $\left[\begin{array}{l} \text { In } \\ 129 \end{array}\right.$ | 13 May [1] 97/21 | 20 September | 27 July 2020 [ | 8 |
| 'There's [1] 27/24 | 136 [1] 171/23 | 20 September [ | 2 | 114/13 114/16 121/14 |
|  | 138 [1] 1 |  | 28 [1] 91/18 | 122/13 128/ |
|  | 139 [1] 175/4 |  | 28 April [1] 92/2 | 8 October [1] 152/2 |
| ... [1] 79/10 | 13th [2] 66/21 66/2 | $2018 \text { [1] }$ | $\text { 2m [1] } 113 / 2$ | 8 pm [1] 196/21 |
| ... next [1] 79/10 | 14 billion [1] 105/24 | $2019 \text { [1] } 2 / 18$ | 2nd [2] 97/15 107/22 | 82 [1] 84/3 |
| ...' [1] 129/11 | 14 February [1] 13/3 |  | 3 | 83 [1] 84/12 |
| 0 |  | 7 158/8 163 |  | 9 |
| 0.1 [2] 97/5 102/6 | 15 April 2020 [1] | 6/ | 3 | 9 March [4] 23/21 |
| 1 | 17/9 |  |  | 66/5 66/ |
|  |  | 192/22 194/22 |  | October [3] 43 |
|  |  | 200/25 201/20 202/20 | 3.25 pm [1] 163 | 74/1 |
| 109/9 110/10 110/13 | $\begin{gathered} 15 \text { N } \\ 13 / 1 \end{gathered}$ | 210/24 211/5 211/23 | 30 November [1] | 5 [1] 18/16 |
| $\begin{aligned} & 110 / 13 \\ & 1,000[1] 213 / 16 \end{aligned}$ | 15 September 2020 <br> [1] 164/3 | 2021 [14] 4/5 4/9 161/22 164/21 167/1 167/8 167/22 171/19 | $\begin{aligned} & 114 / 12 \\ & 30 \text { October [1] } 157 / 6 \\ & \mathbf{3 1 6} \text { millinn [11 } \end{aligned}$ | $\begin{array}{ll} 95 \text { [1] } 208 / 20 \\ 9 \text { th [1] } 66 / 13 \end{array}$ |

A
Aamer Anwar [1] 177/3
abilities [1] 131/8 ability [16] $9 / 16$ 39/18 44/7 44/12 51/12 51/17 58/23 61/12 69/15 72/6 81/23 106/9 141/5 182/16 214/4 215/6
able [27] 11/21 12/15 14/24 15/4 23/11 23/14 26/10 44/8 44/12 58/16 65/16 68/18 71/12 76/4 77/12 137/2 145/14 145/17 170/6 181/17 181/19 182/22 190/4 197/18 205/13 212/17 213/22
about [213] 2/6 6/25 12/2 12/5 12/8 13/11 14/2 15/22 16/8 16/12 17/2 17/14 18/10 18/13 19/19 22/22 23/4 24/17 25/17 26/10 26/15 27/1 27/20 29/3 29/16 30/16 31/3 31/5 32/15 32/18 32/20 33/8 33/17 33/22 34/10 34/12 34/15 34/22 35/3 36/13 36/14 36/16 36/17 36/22 38/12 40/8 45/5 45/6 46/20 46/24 47/4 47/12 48/14 48/23 49/8 49/12 49/20 51/23 53/19 54/4 54/9 54/11 54/22 55/3 55/11 55/25 56/5 58/8 58/23 59/4 59/11 59/15 59/18 60/17 62/14 63/2 63/6 63/7 63/10 64/15 65/2 65/4 65/11 66/10 66/22 67/22 67/23 68/9 68/22 69/17 71/25 72/5 72/12 73/11 73/13 73/14 77/4 77/16 78/9 78/10 80/5 80/17 81/19 81/19 82/3 84/16 84/19 85/15 86/3 89/16 90/8 90/9 90/11 94/14 94/19 95/20 96/20 99/3 99/11 100/1 100/4 100/9 100/21 100/23 102/18 104/5 106/4 106/8 110/3 110/10 113/20 114/5 114/14 115/9 116/23 118/6 119/4 119/16

119/25 121/22 123/17 $167 / 3$ 127/7 127/8 128/2 account [14] 5/19 128/4 128/9 131/23 131/25 134/2 135/3 135/18 135/25 139/4 139/6 139/8 139/17 141/18 141/21 141/21 142/3 144/3 144/18 144/19 145/25 146/7 149/16 149/19 151/8 151/19 152/22 155/14 155/21 155/24 157/24 $\left\lvert\, \begin{aligned} & \text { accurately [2] 105/18 }\end{aligned}\right.$ 158/1 159/15 159/18 190/5 160/16 160/18 163/20 achieve [3] 33/7 164/11 167/11 169/6 126/25 166/9 172/9 174/23 178/8 achieved [3] 156/14 178/15 178/17 179/17 185/8 186/16 181/6 181/22 182/2 achieving [1] 33/2 183/12 183/22 184/15 acknowledge [5] 185/20 187/3 188/6 31/6 34/2 124/10 188/10 188/21 189/9 $124 / 20$ 156/16 189/17 191/16 192/21 acknowledged [3] 195/17 195/21 196/9 7/15 94/23 120/9 198/15 201/12 205/20 acknowledging [1] 206/15 211/3 212/21 35/18
above [6] 95/16 across [21] 3/22 5/1 96/10 97/3 98/2 98/10 101/20
absence [7] 51/5
57/24 60/11 144/9 145/20 181/3 181/3
absent [1] 182/3 absenteeism [4] 201/1 202/24 203/18 207/8
absolute [2] 109/17 114/23
absolutely [12] 9/12 12/2 24/4 24/14 56/4 60/25 79/18 108/3 109/13 125/20 148/21 153/20
abstract [2] 182/9 183/3

## academics [4]

130/15 130/21 144/24 146/21
accept [7] 29/24
121/9 129/17 131/3 147/11 204/23 207/7
acceptable [1]
111/10
accepted [5] 109/7
110/14 206/12 207/14 214/24
accepting [2] 156/17 206/9
access [6] 3/9 3/18 15/8 58/9 185/18 215/10
accommodate [1] 207/3
according [5] 87/20 163/22 164/2 164/20

15/17 38/13 75/15 75/16 84/25 91/16 102/7 102/14 102/14 135/6 145/9 160/4 207/13 accounting [1] 100/25
accurate [4] 131/18

174/11 176/1 180/8 182/19 186/3 189/5 190/9 190/9 190/14
194/9 199/10 201/11 202/11 203/23 204/2 add [1] 194/11 added [2] 142/7 189/13
addition [4] 3/11 25/9 116/11 174/18
additional [8] 55/17
70/5 123/11 174/18 179/25 185/18 194/22 195/2
address [10] 9/9 40/6
52/4 57/15 104/12
116/18 125/9 137/13 197/5 197/25
addressed [3] 92/20 198/8 200/5
addresses [1] 32/2
adequate [1] 12/4
adequately [1] 11/21
adhere [1] 109/19
adhered [2] 41/14
109/15
adjourned [1] 216/21 adjournment [1] 107/15
153/2 156/2 176/15 adjust [2] 52/7
186/19 195/15 197/20 206/22

198/21 201/11 206/5 administered [1] 208/1
act [2] 55/25 192/19
acted [15] 24/1 24/9 25/2 49/6 49/17 54/20 54/21 59/7 65/20 73/10 103/24 113/11 161/11 161/12 180/23 acting [1] 175/11 action [9] 155/25 157/16 175/16 180/15 208/25 209/2 209/22 210/4 212/3
actions [5] 2/5 39/7
41/3 192/1 192/1
actively [3] 81/25 104/2 168/21
activities [8] 82/22
124/3 188/14 188/16 189/14 189/24 190/17 190/21
activity [4] 31/21 32/3 77/12 82/5 actuality [1] 55/22 actually [43] 15/6

214/16
administration [3]
46/2 51/4 187/4
administrations [14]
125/11 169/12 169/16 169/17 171/18 171/20 172/14 173/1 174/17 177/25 182/9 182/15 185/17 186/4
administrations' [1] 171/15
admissions [6] 56/13 61/3 61/4 94/20 100/1 147/9
admittedly [1] 114/4 adopted [3] 50/18 50/21 175/15
advance [12] 72/10
80/18 128/7 173/2
173/17 175/25 176/16 179/9 181/5 182/15 183/12 186/4
advantage [1] 117/22
advertising [2]
16/2 19/6 19/21 28/19 123/25 124/6
28/21 32/22 33/21 advice [96] 6/5 6/15 36/1 41/13 47/2 58/16 7/19 8/11 8/19 8/25 60/16 80/1 89/7 89/12 89/19 99/7 116/2 118/24 119/23 142/17 146/12 152/25 153/7 162/14 168/11 172/25

9/3 9/6 9/18 13/2 13/5 13/22 19/3 20/1 23/12 23/25 24/9 24/25 24/25 25/3 25/4 35/10 37/17 40/13 40/19

47/13 48/25 49/1 49/4 49/5 49/8 49/11 50/5
50/6 50/10 52/20
52/20 54/10 54/16
59/6 59/14 62/13 63/3 65/15 66/16 66/17 68/3 69/5 69/21 73/17
73/21 73/23 77/19
78/25 93/17 97/10
100/19 103/19 113/9
113/10 113/17 128/24
131/5 133/4 133/7
133/9 133/24 134/15
134/21 134/24 135/12
136/15 136/19 140/5
142/12 142/13 142/21
143/10 144/6 150/23
151/16 151/18 165/24
166/7 166/10 198/14
201/5 201/14 203/24
205/8 205/9 205/12
206/25 207/6 207/12 215/2
advisable [1] 73/12
advise [1] 133/1
advised [4] 53/22
66/2 124/14 134/12
adviser [18] 35/19
35/20 36/2 45/17
45/19 53/25 64/15
95/12 111/5 111/6
111/23 120/8 120/13
135/8 138/1 150/5
196/23 206/18
advisers [15] 18/15
18/17 18/20 45/25
48/11 50/6 56/7 63/23
101/16 101/16 116/7
149/13 152/19 154/21 206/18
advising [1] 90/24
advocated [1] 193/21
affect [1] 145/4
affected [3] 2/9
164/15 178/3
affects [1] 112/16
afford [1] 195/10
afraid [5] 163/8
189/18 194/11 196/13 215/16
after [32] 2/20 2/22
13/12 16/25 17/9 27/5 39/14 41/3 44/5 47/20 50/19 57/22 59/21
64/5 76/6 85/25 86/8 87/4 87/13 103/21
120/12 149/19 153/11
153/15 154/15 154/18
155/20 170/15 179/14
179/20 180/9 213/3
afternoon [5] 78/15
163/10 187/17 192/19
194/3
afterwards [2] 43/17
aim [5] 33/7 64/25 105/17 166/9 185/8 aimed [1] 166/24 alarm [2] 100/8 102/18
albeit [1] 199/1 Aldridge [2] 138/16 138/19
alert [2] 154/3 154/12 alerted [1] 129/13 all [170] 1/18 $2 / 12 / 3$ 2/9 3/1 3/10 3/17 5/3 11/5 11/8 14/18 22/20 23/21 24/1 24/23 25/12 26/9 27/18 27/19 29/4 30/8 30/14 32/19 33/17 36/3 36/23 38/9 38/12 38/15 38/17 38/20 38/22 39/17 40/24 43/8 46/13 46/23 46/24 47/19 49/3 50/3 50/25 53/6 56/17 57/9 58/11 58/19 59/5 60/16 61/1 61/1 62/6 62/12 63/11 65/2 66/19 68/5 69/24 70/23 72/22 75/18 76/15 81/7 82/22 83/2 84/21 84/24 85/21 88/25 89/21 89/21 90/20 91/17 93/5 93/5 95/8 99/15 102/4 104/4 104/5 106/5 109/19 112/22 113/12 113/20 114/2 114/25 115/17 115/20 117/6 117/6 117/6 117/7 117/17 117/18 119/13 120/11 120/12 121/5 122/24 123/1 123/2 123/7 123/9 123/17 123/21 124/5 124/25 127/14 129/10 129/14 129/20 131/7 133/25 135/11 135/13 137/9 139/15 143/12 143/18 146/14 146/14 146/22 148/8 151/21 154/14 158/19 158/20 159/20 159/21 160/19 161/4 162/11 163/11 163/21 174/17 176/13 186/7 187/2 190/2 195/11 195/15 197/16 198/16 198/19 200/11 203/15 204/19 204/21 205/5 205/11 205/19 206/2 206/2 206/21 206/24 206/25 211/3 211/6 211/7 212/15 212/21 212/25 213/20 214/7 215/2 215/11 215/12 216/11 216/18

| all right [17] 30/14 | although [5] 3/11 |
| :--- | :--- | 38/22 39/17 68/5 81/7 24/17 90/9 104/19 83/2 84/24 90/20 91/17 95/8 102/4 104/4 122/24 137/9 151/21 154/14 159/20 all-important [1] 129/14

allow [5] 66/21 94/17 132/5 185/16 185/18 allowance [1] 213/18 allowed [4] 22/7 31/3 34/11 43/14
alluded [3] 7/1 101/23 160/21
alluding [1] 140/14 almost [12] 25/23 35/7 50/24 65/20 71/16 119/20 120/21 129/25 136/20 170/16 190/4 207/21
alone [1] 201/2
along [5] 52/3 143/24 145/21 191/5 215/25
alongside [8] 18/5 85/25 86/6 111/5 113/9 143/12 149/10 151/17
already [30] 40/12 44/13 79/6 81/14 100/10 100/11 101/17 102/19 115/9 115/11 115/18 115/25 116/8 117/25 121/1 121/13 121/17 123/18 123/18 140/6 141/14 163/19 163/21 166/11 169/15 178/5 178/6 194/16 200/6 203/3
also [57] 1/15 2/3 5/20 6/14 21/23 26/10 36/2 45/18 54/12 54/13 55/16 63/3 66/2 78/1 80/4 84/12 85/18 87/16 87/18 88/19 89/17 92/7 94/18 94/23 98/12 99/17 100/22 101/2 108/17 110/5 110/8 116/17 120/17 125/1 130/12 132/5 140/3 140/7 143/14 147/19 148/4 149/6 155/20 166/9 168/10 171/16 172/16 179/18 191/2 192/21 192/25 202/17 208/3 215/10 216/9 216/9 216/13
alterations [1] 74/17 altered [1] 10/9 alternative [8] 56/2 139/10 166/8 194/8 194/20 214/24 215/1 215/13 204/2
always [28] 8/22 11/9 11/20 12/11 19/1 26/6 40/12 40/18 64/11 75/25 76/2 81/4 81/17 89/2 97/1 101/22 123/4 126/8 127/1 127/6 158/12 158/15 170/25 187/7 192/3 192/4 209/24 214/21 am [7] 1/2 2/1 41/6 62/20 76/9 150/21 216/21
amended [1] 106/12 amongst [3] 152/18 154/21 203/5
amount [20] 17/13 18/12 47/6 47/11 55/16 57/1 57/25 61/15 77/20 77/21 94/24 107/7 118/18 142/18 161/10 165/11 173/12 180/17 181/5 201/12
ample [2] 122/9 124/22
analogously [1] 137/16
analysed [1] 36/4 analyses [3] 145/9 145/19 146/20
analysing [1] 15/1
analysis [45] 6/5 6/15 8/19 9/1 11/7 11/11 12/17 12/20 12/24 13/8 14/24 15/15 15/19 17/14 17/17 20/1 28/16 35/9 42/3 42/9 48/21 53/15 55/2 73/17 79/14 101/2 101/5 101/7 101/8 107/25 109/2 111/24 127/14 140/2 141/6 142/9 142/21 144/21 144/22 146/8 148/5 162/16 181/1 181/15 184/8
analysts [1] 162/12 analytical [2] 31/18 90/12
Anders [1] 149/25
Anders Tegnell [1] 149/25
angle [1] 79/20
announced [22] 4/4
41/7 41/13 49/15 49/19 49/22 54/24 67/15 73/2 73/9 73/24 97/7 98/7 103/16

114/15 121/13 121/14 anywhere [1] 190/7 123/19 125/19 167/10 apart [2] 89/1 113/2 167/16 211/13 apparatus [1] 215/7
announcement [12]
57/23 59/16 62/5
119/20 120/12 120/21 124/23 152/10 168/4 170/15 170/17 209/16 announcements [1] 13/24
announcing [1] 122/14
another [11] 17/8
43/3 86/24 87/13
91/14 92/9 93/13 105/8 137/19 163/24 168/6
answer [14] 8/17 21/20 22/13 50/13 51/11 133/23 162/5 175/23 178/23 189/19 196/8 198/3 198/5 200/6
answered [1] 170/21 answers [4] 74/10 78/2 193/14 213/12 anticipated [1] 77/24
Anwar [1] 177/3
anxiety [3] 71/4
92/18 161/10
any [60] 3/18 16/7 18/22 39/21 40/2 46/4 46/5 46/24 48/1 55/4 61/12 64/14 66/1 67/23 70/12 75/16 77/4 79/2 79/22
102/23 106/7 115/3
117/19 121/11 124/25
125/12 128/11 128/19
131/21 134/14 134/14
134/17 136/14 136/23
139/2 139/17 145/20
150/16 158/4 159/14
165/21 169/22 174/18
178/18 183/25 185/13
186/23 188/8 194/7
194/7 205/3 205/9
210/1 210/3 210/7 212/14 212/17 213/2 216/11 216/15
anybody [9] 115/6 123/1 147/1 162/4 162/5 162/6 191/8 191/12 191/16 anyone [5] 4/19 16/6 82/3 143/21 162/8
anything [17] 3/25
22/9 24/19 40/21 42/4
44/24 45/4 66/23
77/15 106/7 115/23
116/5 142/7 151/5
184/25 186/11 191/5
anyway [2] 168/1
180/15
appatus [1] 215/7
(58) afterwards... - apparatus

A
apparent [4] 22/25 31/15 129/23 154/25
apparently [1] 111/4
appear [7] 29/6 39/17
41/9 130/23 177/2
179/13 179/16
appearances [1] 34/17
appeared [1] 100/5
appears [5] 9/10
36/25 44/6 44/10 145/2
appease [1] 94/2
applied [3] 65/24
101/5 123/14
apply [2] 106/20 210/2
appreciate [3]
177/19 215/23 215/25 approach [19] 33/12 50/21 67/1 124/1 141/10 152/20 152/20 153/14 154/3 154/12 157/11 157/20 157/25 159/17 181/13 181/24 188/21 195/7 195/7
approached [1]
161/3
appropriate [5] 21/15 36/14 45/8 80/4 135/23
appropriately [2]
11/21 140/20
approval [2] 106/1 106/12
approvals [1] 107/8
approve [2] 104/20 194/1
approved [3] 115/12 167/12 200/13
April [15] 4/9 13/13 16/12 17/9 20/9 22/17 31/22 76/19 78/8 91/18 92/24 92/25 92/25 105/3 106/6 April 2020 [1] 76/19 are [118] 10/22 10/24 21/12 22/20 28/18 29/1 29/13 30/1 30/2 30/3 34/22 36/6 38/12 40/4 41/4 48/7 50/17 53/10 57/10 57/23 58/16 59/13 60/10 61/8 61/14 61/16 66/6 66/9 69/20 69/20 72/8 73/6 75/11 76/1 76/17 78/17 78/20 79/6 79/18 80/10 80/16 81/21 83/20 85/17 92/5 98/14 101/10 102/7 106/19 111/10 113/23 117/14 122/8

122/21 122/22 122/24 As I said [4] 37/25 123/7 123/9 125/17 98/25 136/25 203/8 125/18 125/19 126/25 ascertain [1] 181/2 128/5 128/22 128/23 Asian [1] 200/1 131/12 134/14 134/16 aside [2] 117/22 137/10 139/12 139/19 117/23
140/9 140/22 141/7 141/11 141/20 142/7 143/3 146/4 146/6 147/8 147/9 150/22 154/23 155/16 160/22 161/8 164/23 168/24 170/7 171/7 176/20 177/25 188/25 190/22 190/23 190/23 195/22 196/19 198/15 198/19 198/24 203/8 203/10 204/3 204/8 205/13 206/3 207/21 207/21 208/18 208/21 210/18 210/22 211/9 211/19 215/12 216/9
area [1] 207/23
areas [8] 58/11 119/5 128/1 145/15 172/18 182/7 182/7 211/12 aren't [3] 29/14 38/14 130/22
argue [2] 78/18 192/5
argued [1] 94/6 argument [3] 33/5 33/6 140/25
arguments [13] 6/19 7/24 11/7 22/8 24/17 28/23 41/22 47/14 91/11 147/24 148/23 152/3 194/14
arising [1] 203/18
armed [1] 43/10
around [33] 3/12 4/5
4/9 4/22 4/23 13/11
16/21 16/24 18/14 22/15 22/23 23/19 30/20 48/18 54/19 57/8 62/6 67/4 67/11 90/20 91/18 94/20 97/16 126/17 146/18 155/22 166/21 166/24 168/4 178/19 186/2 188/8 214/13
arrangements [4] 3/15 70/4 177/24 179/20
article [20] 27/10 27/12 27/20 28/5 30/15 30/17 32/15 33/13 33/23 33/25 36/25 81/13 116/22 129/7 129/12 130/12 130/23 131/16 135/12 144/9
artificially [2] 99/10 99/16
as [395] 26/19 27/10 37/4 40/6 45/15 55/9 67/12 72/8 113/20 125/11 131/25 204/19 187/17 189/20 192/21 70/25
attendant [1] 113/23
attended [7] 95/10
119/2 129/18 129/19
132/8 138/6 156/5
attending [2] $1 / 20$ 150/21
attention [7] 31/12
59/5 76/18 96/25
103/14 125/10 135/19 74/9 78/1 83/4 110/3 attributable [1] 131/25 150/8 163/14 attributed [1] 64/24 163/16 163/19 164/11 atypical [1] 14/4 169/9 178/8 181/22 auction [2] 70/20

August [12] 27/12
98/23 119/13 119/14 120/6 120/8 126/10 128/4 147/6 211/11 211/15 213/4 authentically [2] 93/22 93/24
author [1] 27/12 author's [1] 34/13 authorities [11] 126/1 126/3 165/13 165/15 195/22 209/8 213/14 214/18 215/8 215/10 215/14
authority [2] 214/16 214/22
autumn [3] 38/6 38/10 152/20
available [8] 7/19
118/23 146/3 166/6 173/14 174/19 176/15 182/18
average [1] 147/5 avoid [2] 60/23 160/7 avoided [1] 118/4 aware [22] 45/24 73/19 80/22 84/4 84/8 96/22 101/3 112/15 128/5 132/12 137/10 154/10 156/6 158/14 160/9 160/10 178/9 178/14 179/21 184/8 184/17 184/18
awareness [1] 133/15
away [5] 116/20
117/25 131/21 182/9 183/3
awful [1] 147/21
B
babies [1] 191/1
back [35] 13/9 23/11
34/7 44/21 45/20 57/19 66/15 76/6 78/22 79/25 82/22 83/16 84/3 85/2 89/13 89/16 92/17 98/13 110/1 116/20 130/1

131/11 136/10 157/3 166/4 180/3 180/6 186/7 187/2 188/20 193/2 194/5 199/4 202/11 208/14
backdrop [1] 60/24
backed [4] 4/12
123/24 124/6 156/2
backgrounds [2] 116/15 200/1
backing [1] 41/11 bad [4] 42/17 42/21 45/11 46/8
balance [14] 7/18 21/22 38/14 72/22 112/11 112/12 113/18 117/19 117/19 140/21 143/6 166/11 176/5 193/7
balanced [4] 35/21
148/24 149/2 157/23 balances [2] 106/16 106/22
balancing [1] 177/6
ban [1] 49/10
bandwidth [1] 63/13
Bank [6] 16/15 71/11
71/14 140/8 143/19 203/4
banks [1] 143/22
banning [1] 66/10
barbecuing [1] 29/20
Barnett [9] 171/16
172/17 172/19 179/10
181/3 182/3 182/5
182/20 185/22
base [1] 149/7
based [6] 26/13 61/2
62/15 62/15 134/15 146/24
basic [2] 30/23
144/11
basically [1] 211/2
basis [11] $8 / 2415 / 8$ 103/9 147/16 161/14 182/10 183/4 183/5 186/1 191/2 210/10
bat [1] 133/5
be [284]
bear [3] 45/20 79/20 99/21
bearing [2] 110/8 122/16
became [14] 2/15 2/17 2/23 10/3 25/20 37/18 54/15 98/20 164/14 207/13 209/12 212/8 214/2 214/6
because [142] 5/12
7/21 15/6 15/25 16/24 20/11 26/3 27/10
29/25 31/7 32/7 32/23 33/4 33/15 33/18 34/3 34/7 34/11 37/3 37/15

## B

because... [122]
37/19 39/18 40/8 45/16 46/12 46/21 47/17 48/19 49/15 50/12 51/13 52/19 55/9 59/21 62/23
68/22 70/16 70/17 71/5 72/15 75/9 75/19 77/10 77/18 79/17 82/5 85/16 86/1 86/5 86/5 89/2 89/3 90/11 90/16 92/22 94/12 99/14 100/23 102/16
103/22 105/14 112/23
114/2 115/7 116/7 117/13 118/5 119/18 120/5 121/19 121/25 123/2 124/1 124/3 124/4 124/4 124/5 126/8 126/20 126/24 127/3 127/11 127/16 128/3 129/20 132/20 135/24 137/2 139/21 140/16 140/19 141/4 142/18 146/2 149/23 151/23 156/10 156/14 157/1 157/17 158/4 159/8 162/19 162/21 168/16 170/5 172/6 172/21 172/24 173/4 175/17 175/19 176/5 176/16 178/2 178/21 178/22 178/24 179/3 182/24 183/16 189/9 189/24 191/20 191/24 196/25 197/10 197/16 197/21 199/11 201/15 202/23 203/5 203/19 205/16 211/11 212/6 212/10 214/3 214/5 215/4 216/14
become [4] 2/19 4/12 95/5 212/4
becoming [1] 127/2
bed [1] 61/18
beds [5] 55/11 55/12 55/14 60/4 60/4
been [129] 1/12 4/1 4/3 4/15 5/3 5/6 17/18 18/6 19/12 19/12 22/25 23/13 23/24 24/6 35/16 37/13 40/17 42/5 43/19 44/10 44/13 45/2 45/9 45/16 47/22 47/23 47/25 48/9 49/22 51/16 52/7 55/4 59/2 59/25 63/6 63/22 68/22 69/10 71/24 72/15 72/25 76/20 77/2 77/24 79/1 80/21 82/23 92/17 94/21

| 96/18 96/21 99/8 99/9 | $127 / 7$ 151/7 |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | 100/10 101/3 102/20 behaviours [1] 103/1 103/6 107/10 115/7 115/9 115/11 115/17 115/18 117/9 118/7 118/8 118/23 120/17 120/20 121/1 121/13 121/22 121/25 122/2 122/3 122/17 123/4 123/19 123/19 123/21 124/13 125/15 126/13 126/18 128/2 128/12 128/16 132/3 132/5 132/22 133/3 134/4 135/2 139/3 139/20 144/23 148/11 148/13 148/15 148/18 151/17 153/1 160/10 163/15 163/23 168/20 173/6 174/7 174/19 179/1 179/20 179/21 182/23 185/7 187/7 189/10 195/14 195/25 200/8 200/12 201/10 202/8 202/14 203/23 205/8 208/1 208/4 212/7

before [62] 8/2 12/20 13/20 15/20 16/6 17/2 18/25 19/12 21/2 22/10 24/21 27/6 34/16 42/19 42/24 43/2 47/15 49/15 52/2 60/2 69/8 71/3 71/17 75/16 81/8 83/24 86/1 87/11 87/19 88/16 93/3 99/7 104/8 113/6 believed [3] 121/21 115/10 115/19 122/13 122/7 157/19 123/3 125/12 130/3 bells [1] 102/18 136/13 138/21 144/21 below [6] 43/16 158/21 158/21 163/19 102/3 103/18 153/21 167/22 168/1 171/11 173/7 173/10 174/1 174/6 174/13 174/15 175/23 179/5 190/18 198/3 200/5 213/5 216/11
began [1] 95/13
beginning [21] 6/18
6/20 10/13 20/11 21/8 33/8 33/22 51/18 59/2 59/25 81/18 86/20 95/14 96/23 97/2 97/3 104/16 104/19 145/3 152/24 165/8 behalf [7] 108/18 163/14 169/9 177/3 187/18 200/21 208/17
behave [1] 32/25
behaviour [2] 78/22 116/23
behavioural [8]
63/10 123/13 124/18
126/22 126/25 127/5

127/17
behind [2] 192/15 208/15
being [74] 8/20 18/22 20/14 21/12 22/9 23/13 26/24 31/19 33/25 51/7 52/17 53/20 53/24 54/17 55/3 56/19 60/20 61/8 63/15 64/19 75/7 77/14 78/3 78/17 79/14 79/21 81/24 92/1 95/17 96/24 97/3 98/21 99/2 99/3 103/18 105/20 105/24 106/7 106/22 113/2 120/19 127/20 130/14 130/20 132/17 132/20 136/20 137/7 137/13 139/15 139/18 147/16 150/1 150/23 159/14 160/9 160/17 173/2 173/18 175/22 175/25 176/4 177/9 179/9 183/13 185/14 190/1 191/12 194/14 201/13 203/19 204/4 207/21 210/19
BEIS [1] 18/1
belief [1] 157/12 believe [9] 18/21 58/15 120/24 121/18 121/24 122/7 157/10 157/16 184/5 154/9 156/8
bemoan [2] 144/9 145/20
Ben [1] 138/15
beneath [1] 116/10
benefit [18] 30/23
35/18 89/8 90/16
90/18 101/11 133/25
Biosecurity [1] 94/16 145/8 145/19 145/25 146/20 157/14 176/2 190/8 213/25
benefits [4] 35/20 144/24 201/23 215/11 black [2] 83/9 200/1 benefitted [6] 176/7 176/13 186/18 188/24 191/23 192/9
benefitting [1] 213/21
bent [1] 26/7
bereaved [4] 163/15 169/10 177/4 193/16 best [13] 6/4 7/19 166/16 92/8 92/20 145/17 36/22
146/15 195/25 198/8 214/25 215/18
between [49] 4/8 19/14 21/17 21/22 177/16
4/15 5/17 6/24 18/19 88/8 88/15 88/21 106/18 108/1 111/14 167/23 170/17 184/4 174/22

180/16 194/16
big [5] 41/21 46/17
59/3 101/23 108/10
Biggest [1] 74/21
bilat [2] 39/2 39/3
bilateral [16] 9/24
11/4 22/1 28/24 29/1
30/5 40/16 40/22
40/23 47/22 79/12
80/19 91/19 91/22
91/23 142/10
bilaterally [5] 39/4
39/19 39/23 40/3 41/23
billion [9] 105/4
105/24 173/11 188/10 190/5 190/5 195/17 209/7 213/13
billions [2] 165/14 195/21 bit [10] 59/22 78/2 79/25 94/23 113/5 140/14 143/23 155/1 156/6 174/23
bits [1] 28/20
black [2] 83/9 200/1
blessing [1] 110/24
bloc [1] 172/15
blocking [1] 211/6
blocks [3] 3/4 105/25 106/4
blunder [1] 188/1
bluntly [1] 155/1
BMO [1] 70/21
bodies [6] 9/9 16/16

| $11 / 2$ | $20 / 25$ | $21 / 4$ | $63 / 22$ | $117 / 18$ |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| $140 / 9$ | $141 / 8$ |  |  |  | 73/16 77/9 134/15 144/5

160/17 161/12 165/23 body [3] 16/17
137/19 141/1
better [17] 2/8 10/12 bond [4] 68/15 69/11 20/21 20/22 25/24 70/13 72/6
33/2 33/3 33/16 52/18 bones [2] 36/17
boost [1] 167/12 boredom [1] 212/21 Boris [1] 177/16
Boris Johnson [1]
26/4 29/7 29/12 29/22 born [1] 205/10 30/11 31/20 32/2 44/4 borne [1] 211/10 68/12 86/19 87/24 borrow [5] 69/15 112/12 113/18 119/20 borrowed [1] 190/5 120/21 124/23 125/22 borrowing [8] 69/9 136/24 148/24 164/4 69/16 72/13 74/14 166/12 166/25 167/14 $74 / 23$ 75/9 173/15

184/15 184/20 192/23 borrows [1] 70/24
193/8 194/25 195/8 both [10] 5/18 25/21
200/24 200/25 209/14 44/15 49/17 66/4
beyond [6] 43/13 157/2 162/4 178/24
84/17 168/22 173/14 179/18 206/19
bottom [2] 14/1 43/5
bottomed [1] 207/21 brand [1] 123/25
break [7] 59/21 62/19
62/21 104/8 107/11
163/1 163/5
breaker [14] 8/8
10/18 147/14 147/17
147/22 147/24 148/2
148/6 148/12 148/22
153/23 156/13 156/20 156/25
breakers [2] 50/16 147/15
Brexit [1] 19/9
bridge [1] 61/25
brief [4] 34/20 37/6
37/6 81/16
briefed [5] 31/4
34/14 103/7 147/12
152/5
briefing [2] 34/16 147/13
briefings [3] 37/3
83/23 136/17
briefly [4] 91/4 147/3
151/23 201/8
briefs [1] 43/9
bring [14] 31/11 34/7
79/20 80/5 111/21
111/22 112/20 116/23
143/8 145/16 145/24
146/11 154/9 156/8
bringing [2] 98/13
124/19
British [2] 81/12

B
British... [1] 81/20
broad [6] 8/11 19/5 60/6 74/18 97/20 154/2
broadcast [2] 34/19 34/20
broadened [2] 15/7 16/9
broader [9] 8/22
19/14 33/8 33/21
58/25 59/4 89/8
133/15 144/25
broadly [14] 3/16 3/17 6/17 8/24 21/22 23/11 78/20 97/19 99/3 113/2 186/5 186/8 186/11 196/5 brought [12] 19/9 85/2 96/24 103/13 113/12 125/10 137/18 137/19 164/4 165/2 193/2 211/24
brutal [1] 46/2
budget [5] 105/22
105/23 170/12 209/2 212/3
build [1] 140/4
building [3] 3/4 25/22 26/25
bullet [3] 86/15 92/1 99/24
bulleted [1] 43/25
burden [1] 76/11
burdens [1] 76/16
Business [1] 108/8 businesses [11] 6/14 75/8 93/7 108/4
108/11 111/11 127/13 127/20 186/17 197/17 199/14
but [293]
but I [1] 48/6
buy [1] 106/10
C
Cabinet [69] 6/18
7/22 9/8 10/5 10/5 11/15 12/15 12/25 13/5 17/11 17/20 18/15 18/21 18/22 20/13 20/16 22/11 22/19 22/22 23/5 23/7 23/9 29/13 29/14 29/22 30/4 30/4 30/11 42/20 43/22 45/17 51/14 53/7 57/22 62/5 63/24 78/13 79/8 79/15 79/17 80/2 80/10 80/14 80/20 81/3 90/6 90/23 107/20 108/22 109/5 114/11 114/13 121/14

122/14 123/23 128/7 142/11 145/12 145/22 146/10 148/4 152/5 152/24 153/9 153/25 154/6 154/13 156/4 157/3
Cabinet committees [1] 30/4 Cabinet Office [22]
12/25 13/5 17/11 17/20 20/13 20/16 22/22 23/5 23/7 23/9 78/13 79/15 79/17 80/14 80/20 81/3 90/6 123/23 142/11 145/12 145/22 146/10

## Cabinet secretaries

[1] 45/17
Cabinet Secretary [3] 108/22 109/5 152/5
Cain [3] 68/13 187/22 188/6
calculation [2] 30/23 145/21
calculations [3]
144/10 145/8 145/24
call [1] 68/16
called [8] 71/9 87/20 109/9 116/19 150/2 172/19 188/13 190/22 calls [4] 3/15 129/11 129/22 132/15 calls ...' [1] 129/11 came [17] 10/15
21/15 33/7 54/18
57/14 66/15 73/23
77/17 91/11 97/23
100/15 102/21 161/22 172/1 190/14 194/21 212/13
campaign [6] 123/23
124/7 161/18 161/18
187/19 187/24
campaigned [1]
161/18
can [92] 2/7 9/1 10/12 13/8 13/18 14/1 14/12 14/25 17/12 17/16 23/21 29/23 32/21 34/7 38/1 38/9 41/2 43/5 47/8 47/25 48/23 51/11 53/2 55/9 56/10 57/3 57/15 61/8 61/17 68/19 74/2 74/3 74/10 75/24 76/7 79/11 80/1 80/7 87/6 90/10 90/17 91/3 91/4 91/25 93/16 93/23 97/6 104/5 104/8 104/9 110/22 112/20 113/1 114/2 131/25 138/5 142/2 142/6 146/20 146/23 147/12 caused [2] 71/4 151/22 152/21 157/2 195/15 198/19 199/1 199/5 199/20 206/5 208/4
can't [33] 32/12 32/12 53/15 53/15 56/4 56/21 58/21 62/10 82/17 94/12 127/19 134/10 134/23 138/25 144/1 145/19 149/22 165/18 178/12 178/18 183/3 188/7 189/3 189/5 189/6 189/7 189/23 195/12 196/7 199/1 199/5 204/25 205/6
candour [1] 2/11 capability [2] 16/9 140/1 capacity [9] 53/12 55/18 56/12 56/16 57/3 61/5 115/25 118/23 194/21 164/5 165/10 165/12 165/20 166/21 167/2 167/6 167/7 167/12 167/14 167/14 192/22 192/23 193/1 193/7 193/19 194/4 195/8 195/23 198/21 213/9 care home [5]
163/17 163/24 167/2 167/6 167/7
care homes [5] 95/2 163/25 164/5 167/14 192/23
cared [2] 86/1 90/9
carried [1] 39/19
carries [1] 56/25
case [19] 4/12 42/6
53/8 53/9 55/1 77/13
88/20 105/9 127/6
139/9 148/20 149/6
155/11 156/16 158/12
182/20 187/7 210/2 215/18
cases [10] 49/3 49/3
78/19 125/23 126/2 146/5 147/6 206/9 206/11 209/9
casual [1] 118/8
categories [1] 154/2
cause [2] 35/23 175/15 191/19

157/10 166/16 167/16 causes [1] 28/1 169/2 169/3 169/5 causing [3] 100/2 173/15 177/13 177/17 127/25 191/21 177/24 180/3 180/5 CDL [1] 108/9 181/7 183/8 183/15 centre [3] 19/23 183/18 184/22 189/20 94/17 108/16 191/4 191/15 194/11 certain [3] 13/10 care [26] 95/2 101/19 chance [2] 155/1 163/17 163/24 163/25 156/7

22/19 134/1
certainly [11] 11/9
32/21 37/12 38/8 62/19 83/11 86/20 91/14 128/18 207/22 211/21
certainty [1] 174/13
cetera [5] 42/20 93/8
93/8 167/15 167/15
chair [3] 138/18 163/19 195/6
chaired [2] 109/5 111/3
challenge [9] 27/14
27/22 29/10 43/1 43/10 55/4 56/20 61/12 214/21
challenge/scrutinise
[1] 43/10
challenged [1] 9/16
challenging [2] 161/14 175/3

Chancellor [47] 2/19
2/21 4/10 5/11 5/13
5/24 6/3 6/7 8/10 20/15 25/20 26/8 31/10 34/24 35/8 36/21 39/10 39/18 39/23 40/4 42/1 42/6 43/6 43/9 43/18 51/4 51/4 67/21 70/18 78/12 79/7 79/13 79/18 86/13 93/18 93/21 101/14 156/5 158/18 162/2 175/6 185/11 188/12 189/2 201/6 209/3 211/6 Chancellor's [2] 39/12 208/5
change [17] 41/11 42/3 48/9 49/7 50/4 50/11 54/8 66/23 77/5 107/5 111/9 112/2 113/7 113/24 116/23 133/24 186/11
changed [22] 3/20
4/23 25/1 47/24 49/4 49/5 49/10 49/12 50/6 50/7 52/8 54/19 59/15 64/10 66/19 67/6 67/10 99/1 107/1 134/1 153/24 203/13
changes [5] 10/11 66/25 122/2 190/19 209/3
changing [4] $4 / 22$
57/5 65/2 198/18
channels [2] 171/3 203/2
chaos [1] 45/23
chaotic [1] 46/4
characterisation [6]
10/25 156/12 156/24
160/12 161/3 212/2
characterisations [2]
211/9 211/21
charge [1] 183/7
chat [1] 44/20
chatting [2] 29/16 29/20
check [3] 41/6 66/5 167/9
checked [2] 47/1 62/24
checks [2] 106/16 106/22
Chequers [1] 149/22 chief [55] 2/17 35/18 35/20 36/1 45/17
45/19 49/21 53/25 61/14 64/14 95/12 101/15 105/1 105/14 108/20 108/21 109/3 110/8 110/12 110/15 110/17 111/4 111/5 111/6 114/22 119/25 120/7 120/8 120/13 120/13 135/8 136/15 138/1 149/15 150/4 150/4 152/23 155/12 155/18 155/18 155/24 157/4 157/15 162/3 166/2 166/13 167/18 167/23 184/2 184/5 187/5 195/19 196/22 201/14 206/18
Chief Whip [1] 162/3 children [15] 86/2 90/14 90/15 161/19 161/24 187/20 187/25 188/2 188/13 188/16 188/17 188/19 189/21 191/6 191/17
children's [3] 7/3
90/9 187/18
choice [1] 109/23
choices [1] 182/25
choose [1] 142/2
chose [1] 124/24
Chris [6] 38/16 54/22
95/11 119/3 124/11 148/9
Chris Whitty [4]
38/16 54/22 95/11 119/3
Chris Whitty's [1] 148/9
chronological [1] 68/19

## C

chronologically [1]
48/17
circuit [16] 8/8 10/18 50/16 147/14 147/15 147/17 147/22 147/24 148/2 148/6 148/12 148/22 153/23 156/13 156/20 156/25
circuit-breaker [4]
147/24 148/2 153/23 156/25
circuit-breakers [2] 50/16 147/15
circulate [1] 23/23
circulated [2] 23/24 83/23
circumstances [6]
3/15 21/1 52/8 143/4
191/18 207/8
circumvention [1] 22/18
civil [2] 4/2 29/14
claim [1] 100/2
clapping [1] 196/20
Clare [2] 138/6 145/3
Clare Lombardelli [2]
138/6 145/3
clarify [1] 191/4
clash [3] 5/16 6/2 6/24
clear [49] 12/2 21/4 27/3 31/9 32/5 36/16 42/11 49/25 50/18 51/5 51/17 54/22 58/9 58/13 72/8 75/5 80/9 82/17 84/12 89/24 94/21 95/4 98/8 99/14 101/17 101/22 104/7 119/2 119/8 121/24 124/6 130/22 131/5 132/10 134/6 134/6 135/5 138/1 139/17 148/21 164/14 166/1 174/4 190/11 192/9 212/17 212/24 213/24 215/2
cleared [1] 116/6 clearly [16] 20/6 24/22 25/24 29/21 44/1 61/8 66/25 76/24 78/25 80/2 109/15 127/4 133/20 157/22 164/10 196/7
clock [2] 83/4 197/22
close [5] 43/23 49/10 67/17 73/1 105/24 closed [5] 49/14
54/23 73/21 92/3 95/1 closely [4] 12/14 17/25 18/6 141/9 closer [2] 97/5 102/5 closest [3] 18/15

45/25 48/11
closing [3] 66/11 73/8 159/10 CMO [18] 80/6 80/11 84/16 95/11 96/7 96/17 97/18 97/24 100/7 115/5 122/19 124/12 124/13 125/4 149/3 153/19 154/1 206/19
CMO's [1] 153/10 co [1] 10/4 co-ordinate [1] 10/4 COBR [6] 13/25 23/17 23/22 57/21 65/6 148/4
COBRs [2] 53/6 65/13
codicil [1] 127/23 cognisant [1] 165/9 collapse [6] 52/24 53/4 53/9 55/24 56/3 68/17
colleagues [9] 3/8 9/23 11/8 12/15 26/21 27/5 27/9 60/2 138/11 collecting [1] 93/6 collection [1] 99/15 collective [1] 116/8 collectively [2] 6/21 123/19
combination [1] 61/2 combined [1] 94/8 come [28] 3/22 5/1 16/23 24/25 32/5 32/11 32/12 36/6 42/7 48/21 67/3 67/11 89/13 98/25 105/21 111/24 115/4 117/1 117/20 122/17 123/11 125/6 136/3 136/10 168/13 174/11 210/4 215/25
comes [3] 76/6 127/3 172/14
comfortable [1] 99/3
coming [19] 7/22
20/1 42/24 47/15 53/19 55/6 59/6 78/10 82/13 88/16 88/19 89/16 92/5 100/22 114/18 123/17 147/21 151/2 189/25
command [1] 143/7 commence [1] 1/8 commenced [2] 104/16 104/16 commencement [3] 119/21 120/22 170/17 comment [8] 23/8 79/25 94/12 135/17 141/23 168/22 194/16 198/4
commentary [3]

46/23 120/20 135/2 commentators [2] 206/3 207/20
comments [2] 34/22 46/5
commission [3] 79/4 79/5 132/23 commissioned [1] 13/22
commissioning [1] 64/2
commitments [1] 163/8
committee [9] 8/15 9/20 11/13 49/16 73/23 137/13 137/22 142/14 147/13
committees [2] 10/6 30/4
common [1] 111/14
comms [3] 34/1
34/11 37/25
communicate [4] 3/8 3/12 140/21 142/3 communicated [1] 134/3
communicating [1] 76/3
communication [6]
3/24 29/7 32/21 33/1 33/16 34/6
communications [9] 4/8 5/10 32/22 33/12 38/19 45/18 76/25 132/18 187/23
Communities [1] 2/16
community [1] 69/14 companies [2] 117/7 124/1
Company [1] 177/3 comparable [1] 24/19
comparative [2] 91/1 91/5
compare [1] 38/5
compared [1] 58/22
comparison [2]
15/20 15/24
comparisons [1]
108/13
compelling [1] 7/11 compensate [1] 167/6
compensation [7] 164/8 164/22 165/2 166/18 193/22 194/2 194/7
competence [2] 134/25 170/11 competencies [2] 125/17 125/18 competing [4] 7/11 7/18 9/17 89/25
competitive [1] 90/25 conditional [2] 95/21 completely [9] 22/3 100/18
26/2 39/22 54/2 64/11 conditions [3] 96/3 65/1 102/9 123/2 106/19 106/24 185/25
completes [1] 216/5
complex [4] 131/4 134/11 146/4 146/9 conference [5] 149/4 149/17 155/13 155/21 156/3
conferences [6] 38/6 compliance [6] 33/4 38/10 38/11 38/18 49/23 49/25 54/24 212/18 213/2 complimented [1] 11/4
comply [3] 32/25 33/18 199/8 complying [2] 181/18 212/20
comprehensive [2] 190/6 192/7
con [1] 154/20
concept [2] 64/13
202/25
conceptual [2] 57/16
63/16
concern [19] 26/16
66/22 68/17 76/20
80/19 81/10 81/19
82/2 83/3 89/12 90/21
103/22 103/23 117/4
126/16 162/9 167/4
178/15 180/14
concerned [17] 9/10
40/8 54/9 64/3 70/12
76/22 76/23 89/17
92/13 92/14 94/18
104/15 106/15 106/22
119/14 186/25 191/11
concerning [4] 68/15
69/13 126/11 155/6
concerns [28] 36/23
53/10 68/22 71/25
72/5 72/12 73/13
90/11 95/25 99/25
104/2 119/22 121/9 122/10 124/23 126/13
128/2 128/8 139/4
139/8 170/23 170/24
178/10 178/14 178/25
179/17 179/22 207/3
concise [2] 74/10 83/5
concluded [2] 85/21 212/16
concludes [3] 113/6
175/5 215/21
conclusion [2] 2/22
168/13
conclusions [4]
75/16 112/2 112/24
216/12
conclusively [1] 125/2
condensed [1]
142/15

54/14 68/10
confidence [2] 143/8
172/2
confident [1] 186/15
confine [1] 167/7
confirm [1] 70/4
confirmed [2] 147/6
159/9
conflating [1] 133/6
confronting [3] 7/10
8/14 14/3
confusing [1] 56/11
Congress [1] 208/18
conjunction [1]
198/23
consciousness [1] 60/21
consensus [9]
131/17 131/19 132/4
132/20 134/9 134/22
150/23 151/10 152/18
consequence [2]
76/12 84/21
consequences [32]
6/6 8/3 8/12 8/20
10/22 14/9 15/23
31/13 32/18 34/25
35/11 36/19 47/18
65/25 75/22 76/9 76/9
94/9 97/10 97/13
102/15 103/1 112/13
113/19 117/9 134/16
135/19 175/7 177/6
199/16 199/17 201/4
consequent [1]
183/13
consequential [2]
46/12 148/7
consequentials [2]
172/19 182/21
conservative [2] 2/25
61/8
consider [11] 36/10
102/24 111/24 135/23
149/10 151/24 159/3
159/4 159/12 204/21
216/11
considerable [17]
16/17 17/13 18/12
122/1 123/24 142/18
143/11 144/2 176/8
185/4 198/10 200/9
202/9 208/6 213/11
213/21 213/23
considerably [6]

(63) considerably... - Covid-S

C
Covid-S...[9] 119/12
119/12 119/13 119/24 120/8 147/13 148/3 151/24 156/4
Covid-safe [1]
117/25
Covid-secure [2] 118/6 123/21
Covid-Ss [1] 30/4 create [1] 142/1 credible [1] 215/13 credibly [1] 126/23 Credit [2] 176/11 213/16
criminal [1] 7/4
criminally [1] 46/3
crisis [13] 2/23 3/10 3/19 5/16 23/3 71/3 71/17 91/6 122/13 130/25 136/21 139/9 140/24
criticism [1] 193/17
cross [3] 40/2 154/22 166/15
cross-purposes [1] 40/2
crucial [1] 75/7
crystal [3] 134/6
134/6 135/5
crystal clear [1]
135/5
CSA [3] 97/18 125/4 149/3
CST [4] 107/4 166/8 167/10 187/8
cumbersome [1] 214/17
Cummings [2] 20/13 68/12
cumulative [1]
195/17
currency [1] 5/16
current [1] 208/5
curve [5] 52/23 54/8
56/25 64/12 65/2
curves [2] 56/12 56/14
cusp [1] 78/9
Customs [1] 126/9 cut [5] 116/4 116/4 123/5 123/6 206/5
cutting [2] 193/25
197/20
Cymru [1] 169/10

## D

d'être [1] 35/5
DA [1] 184/4
daily [1] 60/3
damage [8] 5/21
52/23 74/12 74/13
74/16 148/7 148/24

160/8
damaging [3] 35/4 109/12 150/14 danger [2] 54/17 63/7
DAs [2] 178/18 184/1 data [37] 15/7 16/2 16/9 17/12 53/3 57/7 57/24 58/9 58/9 58/11 58/16 58/20 59/1 59/24 60/1 60/3 60/5 61/1 91/1 91/5 91/8 93/6 94/19 99/11 99/15 100/2 100/3 100/7 100/22 116/19 117/6 140/5 142/20 142/20 159/11 206/22 215/11
date [12] 62/2 69/3 92/23 96/14 121/12 155/23 165/18 166/7 177/16 177/17 177/21 180/3
dated [12] 13/12 17/9 27/12 31/22 38/25 43/11 78/8 86/21 87/1 87/21 97/21 126/10 dates [4] 59/11 59/12 59/13 119/16 day [26] 13/20 20/11 20/11 34/19 49/2 49/17 49/19 53/13 59/16 62/6 67/15 69/7 70/24 73/2 73/9 73/22 105/14 105/14 114/16 121/15 122/15 147/5 152/4 152/5 209/5 209/5
day four [1] 209/5 day one [2] 20/11 209/5
days [14] 15/1 16/25 19/11 20/16 56/25 59/10 67/6 67/9 71/23 72/2 92/12 93/3 99/7 175/13
DCMS [1] 108/8 deal [12] 3/14 9/6 55/11 61/24 63/6 63/15 65/17 76/3 104/9 137/17 151/22 195/1
dealing [6] 21/1
32/23 42/14 47/18
51/25 141/1
deals [2] 106/23 193/5
dealt [4] 21/2 166/19
179/2 192/25
death [3] 103/12 160/2 160/3
deaths [3] 52/25 78/20 147/22
debate [80] 4/7 5/23

8/4 9/22 15/22 17/2 18/20 25/14 27/4 30/19 37/1 37/9 37/10 37/12 37/17 37/23 40/8 41/12 42/2 44/5 44/11 46/12 46/19 46/23 47/3 47/17 47/17 50/19 51/6 51/20 51/20 51/23 55/7 55/25 57/7 57/25 60/11 62/7 63/2 63/7 63/10 65/9 65/11 65/18 67/22 67/23 68/14 68/20 72/1 73/11 78/9 78/10 81/8 87/9 91/11 94/10 100/4 109/10 112/7 113/12 113/20 113/21 119/4 126/17 128/4 131/19 131/23 134/2 135/2 135/20 135/22 136/8 137/6 137/22 139/13 141/20 158/22 159/1 211/19 212/5 debated [8] 25/16 53/5 53/6 55/23 78/17 112/18 158/1 158/5 debates [15] 18/13 18/15 25/13 26/15 27/7 38/7 45/21 46/7 63/11 63/12 92/18 132/17 137/4 186/7 195/12
debating [5] 28/2 47/21 48/11 63/15 122/17
debt [1] 68/23
decade [1] 143/15
decades [1] 46/18
December [4] 1/1 164/7 168/4 216/22
December 2020 [1] 164/7
decide [4] 97/12 109/25 140/20 176/19 decided [10] 60/13 97/13 107/20 130/14 130/20 134/13 158/10 159/15 164/22 179/6 decides [2] 133/1 172/17
deciding [1] 159/7 decision [100] 7/19 8/3 8/14 9/5 9/10 9/14 9/21 10/7 10/16 10/23 11/2 11/18 11/24 13/11 13/12 13/20 15/18 17/1 17/10 18/13 20/4 20/23 21/16 21/18 21/24 22/3 22/5 22/12 27/2 30/5 30/7 35/2 35/3 37/9 41/16 42/19 42/24 43/19 44/8

44/12 45/6 45/7 47/10 definitely [6] 20/12 47/16 47/23 47/25
50/13 51/6 51/19 52/14 55/19 55/21 60/12 61/25 62/3 62/6 63/1 64/6 64/8 65/18 67/17 67/20 68/2 70/10 70/12 72/5 72/7 72/12 73/24 74/5 74/19 75/23 79/2 84/11 95/24 102/13 110/20 111/15 112/1 113/16 113/18 116/8 134/17 143/4 146/24 149/3 157/7 158/2 158/2 158/8 158/23 159/18 170/12 172/7 173/3 175/7 175/8 187/3 188/8 195/15 decision-dependent [1] 47/10
decision-maker [2] 9/5 9/14
decision-making [27] 9/10 9/21 11/2 11/18 18/13 20/4 20/23 21/18 21/24 22/5 27/2 41/16 45/6 51/6 51/19 60/12 65/18 68/2 70/10 72/7 84/11 95/24 143/4 158/2 187/3 188/8 195/15
decisions [82] 5/21 6/6 6/16 6/22 7/14 8/6 8/7 8/7 8/8 9/17 11/13 11/15 12/6 12/18 15/24 18/9 18/11 18/19 21/12 22/16 23/12 23/25 25/10 25/12 30/1 30/21 31/13 35/11 36/6 36/19 38/14 38/14 40/24 41/13 41/18 41/21 46/13 46/17 48/5 48/7 48/8 48/10 48/15 48/18 49/19 50/3 50/15 50/20 50/25 51/7 51/10 51/22 51/23 52/5 54/23 58/12 61/23 91/9 98/18 116/3 134/5 136/2 146/5 146/6 151/2 158/12 158/15 161/7 161/8 171/6 175/9 175/18 177/7 177/8 178/2 179/24 187/1 193/17 201/6 204/12 209/11 209/18
deck [1] 17/12 declaration [1] $1 / 13$ deemed [4] 118/23 121/25 196/2 199/7 deeply [2] $2 / 1133 / 10$ depend [1] $8 / 14$

## D

depended [1] 199/17
dependent [2] 47/9 47/10
depending [1] 41/18
deployed [1] 19/22
Deputy [6] 31/24
124/13 149/15 155/12
155/24 157/14
Deputy CMO [1]
124/13
derived [1] 151/19
descends [1] 17/16
describe [7] 5/14
5/15 6/23 25/8 129/12
208/23 209/20
described [12] 18/8
19/24 20/7 23/4 25/7
46/2 109/17 116/21
160/3 164/7 164/25
209/18
describes [1] 193/10
describing [1] 117/3
design [3] 6/12 197/5
197/25
designed [11] 102/3 115/7 115/21 116/16 118/22 121/19 126/8 127/17 132/4 200/7 209/8
desk [1] 166/15
despite [3] 167/22
185/14 211/7
detail [9] 17/16 43/13 52/11 59/22 70/3 75/4 81/9 188/8 196/9
detailed [5] 15/15
55/25 142/8 152/14
198/13
details [1] 167/9
determined [2]
171/16 199/9
detriments [1] 35/22
devastating [4] 36/18 117/9 164/1 199/15
develop [3] 42/1 42/1 141/19
developed [7] 10/8 15/9 16/8 69/11 96/5 99/1 146/15
development [4]
42/5 42/9 71/6 86/3
devolution [3] 170/5
170/14 185/24
devolved [22] 125/11
169/12 169/16 169/17 170/7 170/8 170/11 171/15 171/17 171/20 172/14 173/1 174/17 174/24 177/9 177/25 182/7 182/8 182/15 185/16 186/4 187/4 devoted [1] 130/24

DFT [1] 18/1 DH [5] 20/7 53/20
141/15 166/10 167/11 DHSC [5] 104/21 104/23 106/18 164/7 164/20
Diamond [3] 138/16 138/18 141/8 diaries [1] 210/23 diary [1] 161/21 did [127] 2/19 3/19 4/9 5/25 7/1 8/4 8/5 8/9 11/10 14/7 16/15 18/18 18/21 19/14 20/14 21/23 27/8 28/21 31/17 32/9 35/15 37/6 37/6 39/14 39/15 39/25 42/11 47/19 48/4 48/8 50/9 51/11 51/17 52/2 52/3 54/7 56/18 57/4 62/8 63/13 65/17 66/3 67/16 68/20 71/24 72/5 73/1 73/11 74/19 77/4 77/6 91/6 92/24 99/3 100/13 101/21 101/25 108/6 111/16 114/19 115/4 117/8 119/10 120/1 125/11 125/17 129/6 129/24 132/12 134/20 135/12 135/15 136/14 136/21 137/21 139/7 140/1 141/15 142/18 143/13 143/19 144/14 145/7 146/21 147/25 149/5 150/1 150/9 152/15 158/17 159/3 161/2 162/6 162/8 162/18 162/24 165/14 166/15 169/17 170/20 170/22 172/25 174/14 181/21 181/23 183/21 184/9 186/17 189/8 189/11 189/20 190/8 194/1 195/19 199/10 200/3 205/11 206/21 209/1 210/3 210/12 211/17 213/1 213/2 213/13 213/25 215/10
didn't [64] 6/23 11/11 12/3 12/10 23/6 23/13 24/18 25/18 32/24 33/17 37/14 44/17 49/6 50/10 59/24 62/7 62/8 65/22 70/25 79/24 80/8 80/24 80/25 82/6 92/10 97/9 97/9 98/25 103/3 103/4 103/8 114/2 115/22 121/18 122/7 122/9 122/11 122/12 122/15 128/7 129/9 134/19 139/24 144/1

145/23 149/17 150/25 disagree [3] 38/2 151/19 155/25 156/14 142/6 202/14 156/19 157/1 157/8
disagreed [1] 159/3 157/9 157/22 183/11 disagreement [1] 189/18 194/9 205/18 212/4 212/11 213/1 214/12 215/7
Dido [1] 210/25
difference [7] 108/1 108/11 141/14 178/18 210/9 212/18 213/2
different [66] 2/4
7/22 9/23 11/5 11/23 11/23 12/24 15/21 22/4 28/20 32/10 38/15 41/17 41/18 41/22 42/13 42/18 42/23 43/1 46/20 47/13 47/14 50/25 69/14 72/16 72/16 95/3 101/2 105/23 108/17 110/25 112/4 113/15 114/18 118/21 123/11 124/20 125/8 133/6 138/24 139/5 139/12 139/19 139/22 140/17 142/5 145/14 145/15 145/15 146/11 149/8 150/18 172/25 180/1 182/24 189/10 195/16 198/18 202/10 202/11 203/2 203/8 208/2 209/20 214/20 214/22
differently [3] 142/3 175/11 192/4
difficult [18] 7/17 8/13 12/6 20/19 20/24 72/22 78/18 89/12 89/19 129/16 148/23 155/10 155/17 161/1 161/6 162/21 177/6 216/1
difficulty [1] 183/6
digest [1] 22/8
dimensions [1] 146/8
direct [4] 57/25 76/12 203/17 204/4
directed [2] 9/7 58/1
direction [1] 147/23
directly [13] 23/6
40/7 142/21 152/3
166/23 167/17 168/19 177/20 193/3 193/16 194/12 200/23 201/25 director [5] 45/18 135/17 136/8 155/19 187/22
disability [1] 201/23
disabled [1] 192/20
disadvantage [1] 90/25
disadvantaged [1] 188/17

63/14 64/13 65/14 66/7 66/23 67/10 67/14 67/14 68/6 68/7 68/7 70/16 74/11 75/16 77/4 77/7 77/15 79/16 79/23 82/25 84/13 87/8 89/1 90/13 94/3 94/5 95/9 95/16 95/19 96/24 100/15 102/2 110/11 112/19 113/24 114/24 115/22 120/24 120/25 121/5 121/9 122/8 122/25 124/10 124/20 124/24 127/18 128/11 128/19 129/3 133/2 139/18 139/19 139/25 140/2 140/4 141/6 141/11 145/14 145/17 146/1 146/2 146/4 146/7 146/7 146/20 158/6 160/11 169/23 171/1 172/10 175/21 179/7 182/5 182/19 182/25 185/15 186/1 188/6 191/7 191/25 192/3 192/4 194/19 195/10 197/8 197/8 199/19 201/18 202/2 203/16 205/8 207/7 209/24 211/17 212/20
document [13] 13/18
17/8 17/9 28/19 31/22
32/1 32/4 32/6 32/11
33/23 64/1 84/17 147/4
documentation [1] 57/20
documented [2] 166/2 213/12 documents [1] 167/20
does [5] 14/15 32/11 32/12 39/17 70/20 doesn't [11] 3/9 33/14 88/21 90/18 120/18 126/5 142/1 143/17 157/16 159/13 174/9
doing [28] 21/3 26/14 31/7 34/3 37/21 37/22 52/11 65/5 91/8 98/13 105/19 112/13 117/11 117/16 124/2 128/19 134/14 135/11 140/10 140/10 160/17 161/12 170/10 170/20 214/17 214/21 214/25 215/14 domain [3] 93/4
143/12 144/4
domains [3] 7/23
36/2 37/22
3 domestic [1] 150/18
dominated [1] 65/9
don't [126] 3/18 3/20
4/14 4/19 6/2 9/15 12/9 20/24 22/8 31/9 32/4 32/9 33/24 35/15 35/15 36/4 38/18 42/3 42/16 42/21 44/19 44/24 44/25 45/4 45/10 46/5 46/8 47/12 48/18 51/13 51/21 52/8 53/16 55/2 55/3 56/18 56/19 57/6 57/6 61/6 61/9 61/13 63/17 64/10 64/13 65/7 65/15 66/7 66/10 66/17 66/21 67/22 69/2 70/3 70/15 72/19 73/14 75/15 75/17 77/15 84/15 84/22 88/4 88/8 90/18 92/23 94/13 95/19 97/14 98/24 99/18 101/12 102/2 110/3 121/4 121/24 126/24 132/14 138/20 138/20 138/24 139/17 139/25 140/11 141/16 143/22 147/1 150/16 151/4 151/11 151/14 155/15 155/15 158/3 159/16 161/2 161/24 162/1 162/8 165/21 167/25 168/18 169/2 169/21 169/22 170/1 170/15 170/19 170/20 172/13 174/11 175/23 181/7 183/25 186/23 191/7 191/12 199/6 201/9 201/13 201/21 202/14 204/4 206/14 207/22 215/13
done [36] 5/21 8/5
11/3 16/18 31/14 37/8 52/24 55/17 61/20 61/21 74/12 74/16 80/18 83/14 83/15 91/3 100/18 101/3 103/6 116/2 117/12 121/22 122/3 144/17 145/23 160/22 165/17 173/6 174/8 174/13 184/8 184/25 199/13 203/15 203/24 213/4
doubt [12] 17/22
20/24 34/23 58/21
63/25 67/12 71/23 113/13 186/12 187/1 203/13 215/24
down [21] 33/10 35/3
55/20 61/5 65/18
70/12 72/10 78/1 79/14 79/17 79/21 80/20 82/1 92/7 94/9 143/23 159/8 183/13

197/22 205/3 205/21 Downing [8] 29/19
45/22 47/20 47/20 50/18 142/22 149/21 187/22
Downing Street [8] 29/19 45/22 47/20 47/20 50/18 142/22 149/21 187/22
downplay [1] 25/6 drafted [1] 164/6
Drakeford [2] 175/1 178/25
Drakeford's [5] 171/9 171/11 171/23 172/11 175/22
dramatic [1] 66/25 driven [2] 37/16 81/22
driver [1] 117/15 driving [2] 25/6 57/10 drugs [1] 146/8 due [6] 1/19 22/21 165/2 180/18 201/1 207/10
duration [3] 14/22 101/6 101/9
during [31] 3/19 19/9 23/10 25/13 42/25 42/25 49/3 49/4 72/2 76/13 76/21 85/19 130/24 136/21 137/12 139/8 139/16 141/9 143/13 145/7 171/6 172/4 184/6 186/9 187/20 187/25 188/16 188/21 189/22 190/9 196/25
duty [2] 116/4 123/6 DWP [5] 18/2 208/3 215/2 215/5 215/11 dysfunction [3] 22/19 22/22 23/5

## E

each [10] 14/7 25/24
26/22 51/1 52/4 52/6
52/10 95/22 157/3 214/18
earlier [19] 22/15 38/4 38/8 38/20 41/15 63/2 79/25 95/4
121/12 148/13 157/23
160/16 160/21 172/5 185/6 197/10 198/10 212/9 213/6
earliest [1] 165/14 early [39] 14/18
14/25 15/13 16/19 19/18 20/16 23/15 40/14 54/10 54/12 58/10 63/5 65/7 65/15 67/24 68/8 68/10 84/5 85/24 86/7 86/18 87/2

87/24 88/14 90/14 92/12 96/7 97/15 125/4 129/13 144/18 163/23 165/18 173/9 175/24 179/5 180/15 184/11 201/12
ease [1] 8/7 easements [4] 39/6 39/11 40/9 50/16
easily [1] 56/11
easy [4] 7/14 20/20
38/14 215/24
eat [26] 98/20 114/14
114/17 114/24 115/7 115/12 115/21 119/11
119/16 119/21 120/2
120/12 121/10 122/15 edged [1] 10/16 123/10 123/12 126/1 edited [1] 129/14 126/9 126/12 161/24 Edmunds [2] 35/23 169/14 191/7 197/3 199/2 199/22 200/6 eating [1] 123/18 economic [115] 5/18 5/18 5/20 6/6 6/9 6/12 Education Secretary 7/5 8/20 8/25 13/7 15/19 15/23 16/20 educational [1] 86/2 17/14 17/17 18/1 25/4 effect [12] 4/3 10/21 26/6 26/13 29/4 31/14 31/21 32/3 32/19 34/25 35/9 35/10 35/22 35/25 36/3 36/9 36/18 37/8 43/7 46/15 48/20 48/23 73/16 74/7 74/21 75/1 78/23 79/7 79/13 79/20 81/21 84/6 84/10 85/16 90/4 90/7 92/21 93/17 94/14 102/14 108/1 111/6 111/24 112/8 112/13 112/19 113/10 113/19 116/3 116/11 117/22 123/2 123/8 123/15 126/21 136/4 136/10 137/10 138/1 138/9 139/13 139/20 140/12 140/17 141/17 143/6 144/3 145/19 152/3 160/8 177/6 185/4 185/14 186/13 186/15 187/1 elected [1] 2/13 191/19 200/22 201/20 element [3] 8/24 202/8 202/14 203/4 93/19 120/10 203/6 203/22 204/6 elephant [1] 118/3 204/9 204/14 204/16 elevation [1] 135/21 204/18 205/10 205/12 elicit [4] 126/20 206/1 206/2 207/7 126/22 126/24 127/5 207/17 207/18 207/20 Elizabeth [3] 38/25 207/24 207/24 208/7
economic-related [1] 29/4
economically [4] 14/10 25/15 102/21 109/12
economics [4] 6/24

## 43/4 93/10

Elizabeth Perelman
[3] 38/25 43/4 93/10
eloquently [2] 93/21 93/24
else [7] 70/2 82/25
115/6 116/5 143/2

143/21 188/25 elsewhere [3] 122/4 142/2 176/12 email [27] 38/24 39/14 39/14 43/3 44/17 64/2 78/6 78/11 79/24 80/1 80/7 81/1 86/11 86/24 87/16 87/20 92/23 93/10 93/13 98/24 99/7 99/23 101/24 103/3
103/21 109/13 138/11 emails [3] 103/5 103/8 142/11 emergency [2] 68/13 195/20
emotional [1] 60/24 emphasis [1] 152/22 emphasise [2] 22/20 216/7
employ [1] 127/21
employed [5] 82/11
89/5 184/12 190/3 213/20
employees [1] 83/9
employers [1] 195/4 employment [2] 15/11 213/19
empower [1] 135/13
empowered [1]
135/14
empowerment [1] 139/8
enable [2] 107/6 171/20
enabled [1] 182/25 encourage [8]
116/12 116/13 116/24 116/25 117/20 122/16 122/20 127/17
encouraged [5]
114/17 115/3 123/10 130/6 130/7
encourages [1] 78/21
encouraging [1] 117/24
end [38] 65/4 92/24 92/25 95/15 95/18 96/19 97/4 97/24 98/1 98/9 98/19 98/22
100/8 100/11 100/14 101/15 101/18 102/1 105/24 128/3 149/16 149/20 152/22 152/25 153/18 155/23 157/2 157/8 157/11 157/15 166/25 168/7 189/8 205/18 209/13 211/24 212/5 212/13
ended [8] 44/11
77/22 105/24 153/6 153/8 159/7 190/12 190/16
(66) don't - ended
energy [1] 129/2
engage [3] 8/4 143/5
161/9
engaged [4] 15/12
140/3 143/20 214/7
engagement [2]
184/1 206/17
engaging [1] 42/18
engine [1] 19/24
England [16] 16/15
71/11 71/15 140/8
143/19 172/18 172/22
173/4 175/12 175/15
175/19 182/24 185/21
198/15 198/23 203/4
Enjoy [1] 123/23
enormous [8] 2/9
56/20 57/1 71/4 129/1
161/9 165/9 165/11
enormously [1] 35/4
enough [6] 50/1 59/4
147/18 195/7 202/3
202/21
enriching [1] 188/15
ensue [1] 53/1
ensure [10] 10/19
41/7 70/5 77/6 83/13
85/1 101/20 117/14
118/22 177/25
enter [3] 71/7 104/25 106/20
entered [2] 16/1
110/20
entering [1] 163/25
entire [7] 5/16 73/22
160/20 182/10 183/4
198/22 205/17
entirely [13] 39/21
41/21 42/13 45/11 80/8 118/21 124/7 142/24 150/25 153/11 154/16 196/24 210/11
entirety [1] 131/6
entitled [6] 79/18
110/5 110/7 111/14 123/23 161/19
entity [1] 176/5
entrance [1] 198/18
envelope [4] 104/23
104/24 105/2 105/4
envisaged [1] 41/4
epidemiological [12] 5/17 54/8 96/6 96/17 101/16 102/25 110/22 137/14 149/11 155/16 155/21 156/1
epidemiologically [6]
102/1 150/15 153/22 154/8 155/2 156/6
epidemiologists [1] 144/16
equal [1] 112/7
equalise [1] 185/1 equalities [1] 83/25 equality [2] $84 / 1$ 200/3
equally [1] 210/3
equals [1] 133/19 equate [1] 92/14 equivalent [2] 113/2 136/5
error [3] 100/2 100/5 100/6
errors [2] 99/8 99/14 erstwhile [1] 1/16 especially [1] 191/25 essence [2] 91/1 193/25
essential [19] 13/6
67/20 85/12 85/15 85/20 85/25 86/19 86/23 87/5 87/8 87/17 87/24 88/1 88/15 88/16 159/4 159/10 159/19 178/1
essentially [5] 59/7 71/14 76/22 77/22 150/11
established [5] 24/6 109/2 111/20 160/7 166/20
estimated [2] 145/6 200/24
estimates [1] 203/13
et [5] 42/20 93/8 93/8
167/15 167/15
et cetera [5] 42/20
93/8 93/8 167/15 167/15
ethical [1] 35/24
ethnic [8] 82/14
83/10 116/15 196/18
197/6 197/14 198/1
200/1
ethnicities [1] 198/16
Europe [3] 77/12 125/7 153/2
European [3] 77/11 91/2 108/16
evaluate [1] 144/24
even [22] 27/6 49/20 61/18 66/8 80/4 80/7 82/22 133/7 133/8 143/10 144/5 144/8 149/13 153/6 153/8 153/15 154/15 158/2 181/2 181/5 190/15 214/22
evening [1] 29/16 evenings [1] 196/20 event [9] 39/14 70/5 71/2 104/6 139/2 157/22 164/25 166/20 185/17
events [4] 49/10
66/11 123/3 143/13
eventuate [1] 101/21 evolved [2] 38/5 38/7 ever [20] 6/2 6/23 exacerbated [1] 21/19 31/6 34/2 46/18 199/2
103/5 106/3 133/2 exact [9] 78/25 82/17 137/21 138/3 169/21 $\quad 96 / 14$ 141/24 145/13 170/1 170/15 170/20 166/7 176/8 188/7 174/11 191/12 206/14 212/24 215/24
every [15] 4/25 22/4 29/12 29/22 30/11 30/24 31/11 41/16 81/16 125/7 143/1 144/11 158/6 170/11 209/23
everybody [8] 20/24 37/10 51/9 61/6
129/18 129/18 199/7 213/24
everyone [11] 7/14
20/25 29/23 51/11
76/7 76/7 76/8 117/13 127/15 135/4 153/13 everything [13]
12/16 27/25 28/8 37/15 42/12 57/3 57/12 75/17 82/25 129/6 143/2 199/19 204/7
evidence [97] 1/8
1/23 2/10 3/4 4/3 5/6 5/13 7/19 9/13 11/7 12/17 18/13 22/17 22/20 24/23 28/20 35/16 37/20 40/18 42/2 42/10 45/16 63/6 66/24 71/17 73/16 75/15 85/21 89/14 96/16 96/17 105/10 108/9 109/2 114/4 114/12 114/12 117/6 120/17 124/10 125/1 125/22 125/24 126/4 127/14 128/13 132/3 132/5 132/22 133/11 137/25 138/4 144/7 145/2 148/10 149/7 151/7 152/9 156/17 159/2 159/9 159/21 162/12 162/23 163/19 166/2 166/17 168/10 169/15 174/16 177/5 181/11 185/6 185/10 185/13 187/2 192/8 194/3 194/12 194/23 195/18 197/16 203/21 203/24 204/17 211/7 211/10 211/16 212/15 212/17 212/25 213/24 215/21 215/25 216/6 216/6 216/11
evident [3] 36/18 133/1 184/19 evidential [1] 150/23 evolution [1] 37/23

## 189/7

exactly [15] 16/21
58/23 89/23 94/20
119/18 127/11 134/23
145/12 155/23 159/17
160/18 165/18 169/1
198/24 205/1
examined [1] 107/21
examining [1] 143/3
example [12] $8 / 6$
18/1 38/6 50/15 77/9
77/13 144/22 179/25
181/7 185/19 205/13
210/24
examples [1] 121/8
exception [1] 153/2
exchanges [2] 4/1
5/5
Exchequer [18] 2/20
2/21 5/12 5/13 5/25
6/3 8/10 26/8 31/10
35/8 36/21 77/4
104/14 156/5 158/18
162/3 175/6 189/2
Exchequer's [4] 6/8
83/12 84/14 85/8
exclusively [4] 9/7
9/8 130/23 207/22
Excuse [1] 128/14
executive [1] 195/19
exhibit [2] 85/13
171/10
exist [4] 139/24
140/6 141/14 141/15
existence [1] 22/14
existing [6] 49/22
101/17 137/15 145/4
173/14 180/20
exists [2] 140/19
141/4
exit [6] 28/16 77/17
94/18 98/25 206/16
206/20
exits [1] 198/19
expanding [1] 105/6
expect [7] 4/2 11/25
145/22 170/9 170/13
202/4 202/22
expectant [1] 190/24
expected [1] 124/18 expense [1] 107/6
experience [2] 41/20 134/16
experienced [1] 52/2
expert [3] 113/17
129/1 144/5
expertise [8] $7 / 23$

141/4 141/13 141/15 146/17
experts [5] 15/12
53/22 198/15 198/24
203/6
explain [2] 71/20 90/13
explained [5] 71/23
114/4 130/14 130/20
169/15
explaining [1] 72/19
explains [1] 205/1
explanation [3]
174/21 203/1 204/1
explicit [3] 54/5
127/18 132/14
explore [1] 178/21
explored [1] 192/11
exponential [2] 52/23
92/9
express [2] 139/7
150/9
expressed [9] 72/17
76/20 81/9 90/21 94/8
128/8 141/21 191/8 191/16
expressing [1] 178/25
expressly [4] 31/19
32/2 119/11 121/11
extant [1] 139/3
extended [4] 126/7
175/17 176/12 216/14
extension [4] 126/10
126/12 126/17 128/5
extensive [6] 9/25
16/13 48/16 187/2
206/17 209/15
extensively [6] 15/12
37/14 140/3 143/18 158/1 158/5
extent [13] 51/13
53/12 55/22 63/13 65/14 65/17 68/17
72/2 72/11 80/15
92/12 100/13 132/6
external [7] 15/12
16/10 16/16 16/17
132/18 140/3 141/7
extra [18] 14/23
123/21 141/19 165/15
165/16 172/20 173/1
173/11 173/16 173/18
174/10 174/12 175/24
179/7 182/14 185/2
190/16 209/10
extract [1] 161/20
extraordinary [1] 118/18
extreme [2] 71/18 135/19
extremely [5] 20/24
71/2 148/24 160/20
139/23 139/24 140/19 210/6

| E | $[21$ | finance [3] 1 | flag [2] 119/8 119/9 | $/ 13$ |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| eye [1] 102/25 | fate [2] 130 |  | flatten [2] 54/8 64/12 |  |
| eyes [1] 136/5 |  |  |  | forgotten [1] 83/13 |
| F | favour [2] 109/20 | 72/11 173 | 18 | 125/3 136/ |
| face [2] 133/25 |  | 81/13 | flexibility [5] | formal [9] 24/5 25/9 |
| 181/20 | fear [7] | 181/25 182/10 184/ | 171/21 173/1 173/19 | 25/12 26/23 30/1 30/2 |
| face masks [1] | /19 154/23 197/1 | 194/3 208/18 208/25 | 178/3 | 138/2 169/22 |
| 133/25 | 205/16 205 |  | flexible | formally [4] 5/4 28/2 |
| [1] |  |  |  |  |
| facilitate [1] 9/21 | fearful [1] | financing [1] | fle | format [1] 42 |
| facility [2] 71/9 71/11 | feast [1] 109/ | find [3] 38/19 | flick [3] 79 | formed [4] 5/6 23/24 |
| facing [2] 34/21 | fe |  |  |  |
| 208/20 |  |  | 1] $97 / 13$ |  |
| fact [37] 4/7 9/3 17/1 | February [4] 2/19 |  | focus [13] 14 | 187/22 |
| 28/7 28/19 36/17 37/4 | February [4] 2/19 | finely [3] 148/24 149/2 157/23 | $\text { focus [13] 14/25 } 33$ 38/3 128/12 128/16 |  |
| 37/9 38/12 40/21 44/4 | February 2020 [1] | 149/2 157/23 <br> finish [1] 120/5 | $38 / 3128 / 12128 / 16$ $135 / 3135 / 19$ $135 / 25$ |  |
| 45/13 46/19 56/1 | February 2020 [1] | finish [1] 120/5 | 135/3 135/19 135/25 | forms [1] 140/5 |
| 64/21 67/21 76/6 78/8 | 2/19 | firebreak [6] | 136/1 141/25 197/16 | formula [8] 171/ |
| 81/10 90/20 94/5 | fed [7] | 155/14 172/1 172/4 | 202/9 207/22 | 172/17 179/10 181 |
| 94/15 95/11 116/19 | 18/5 30/7 51/15 | 172/10 175/14 | focused [5] 52/2 | 182/3 182/6 182/2 |
| 118/1 125/24 126/18 | 103/17 137/15 | firm [3] 15/11 15/ | 131/14 185/6 188/17 | 185/22 |
| 129/13 130/6 131/22 | Federation [1] | 82/17 | 18 | forth [3] 3/16 50/17 |
| 134/11 140/25 160/4 | 196/18 | first [67 | fo | 166 |
| 164/18 179/5 201/2 | fe | 13/11 15/18 16/2 17/4 | follow [4] | forthcoming [1] |
| 202/10 | 41/1 51/ | 19/1 19/4 20/6 20/23 | 86/23 138/15 150/3 | 120/1 |
| factor [3] | 51/18 80/24 81 | 22 | followed [ | fortnight [1] 103/20 |
| 101/23 204/25 | feedback [1] | 43/5 48/14 48/18 | 6 | forum [4] 9/22 45 |
| factored [2] 203/ | feeding [3] 80/10 | 50/12 52/14 63/1 66/8 | 206/25 | 184/6 201/10 |
| 203/15 | 80/11 130/1 |  | following | forums [4] 11/2 |
| factors [3] | feel [3] 11/10 2 | 76/19 76/22 86/13 | 15/3 29/14 39/9 51 | 30/6 40/15 122/10 |
| $\begin{array}{r} 1 a 0 \\ 20 \end{array}$ | 206/19 | 88/22 91/24 92/1 | 62/5 62/13 68/3 74/11 | forward [9] 2/10 |
| facts [1] 52/8 | FEHMO [1] | 96/18 97/22 101/ | 76/18 79/4 79/10 | 52/11 79/3 101/19 |
| failed [2] 68/24 70/19 | fell [2] 162/15 | 102/6 105/13 114/14 | 211/ | 138/2 165 |
| failure [1] 158/4 | felt [19] 11/9 12/3 | 114/24 125/4 131/15 | follows [2] 93/13 | 194/6 194/18 |
| fair [22] 7/12 9/18 | 12/11 12/16 | 132/1 133/7 144/ |  | forwarded [1] 17 |
| 10/25 14/15 15/17 | 23/10 23/13 33/ | 153/1 163/11 163/21 | food [7] 161/19 | found [2] 19/16 |
| 15/25 38/21 55/16 | 33/10 40/12 40/18 | 165/4 165/7 169/14 | 188/14 188/15 189/15 | 179/23 |
| 70/14 104/13 105/4 | 51/14 76/1 76/2 80/2 | 170/4 171/8 171/9 | 189/24 190/21 213/8 | Foundation [1] |
| 109/25 148/3 156/12 | 81/1 81/4 121/23 | 173/9 173/20 173/25 | footballer [1] 161/17 | 162/13 |
| 160/11 161/3 175/22 | 15 | 177/10 177/14 178/8 | fora [2] 21/12 124/25 | four [6] 125/13 |
| 194/19 209/23 211/9 | female [1] 83/9 | 178/10 178/15 179/3 | forced [1] 143/5 | 133/19 175/10 177/23 |
| 1/21 212/2 | ferocious [1] 48 | 179/11 180/3 183/6 | forecast [2] 16/4 | 192/20 209/5 |
| faith [3] 58/5 | few [9] 1/22 3/21 | 193/21 209/1 209/2 |  | four nations [2] |
| 161/12 | 20/23 48/25 67/6 | 211/22 212 | caster [3] 16/11 | 125/13 175/10 |
| fall [1] 74/22 | 71/22 108/10 131/1 | First Minister [6] | 93/1 143/16 | framework [1] 187 |
| familiar [7] 32 | 175/13 | 171/9 177/10 177/ | forecasting [4] 16/13 | frankly [2] 47/3 |
| 53/21 101/7 180/12 | few weeks [2] 20/23 | 178/10 178/15 183/6 | 143/20 203/4 203/15 | 214/17 |
| 194/13 195/11 196/1 | 48 | Firstly [4] 44/3 | forecasts [1] 56/6 | fraught [1] 48/2 |
| families [6] 117/10 | few | 159/25 181/22 208/23 | forefront [3] 83/11 | free [8] 161/16 |
| 160/25 163/15 169/ | fiat [1] 51/22 | fiscal [22] 5/18 6/9 | 91/11 91/14 | 161/20 187/20 |
| 193/16 213/19 | field [1] 145/ | 7/9 15/19 15/23 26/7 | foregone [2] 31/21 | 188/11 189/12 189 |
| amily [5] $2 / 227$ | fifth [1] 214/ | 26/13 31/13 34/25 | 164/9 | 190/15 |
| 29/17 165/10 199/18 | figure [1] 21/21 | 35/10 37/8 74/15 | [1] | freedom [1] 17 |
| 12] | final [18] 9/10 11 | 102/15 123/3 123 | forensic [1] 3/4 | freeloaders [2] |
| 34/23 47/2 56/10 | 22/3 22/10 22/11 | 123/12 124/8 127/3 | foreseeable [1] | 161/25 191/7 |
| 89/10 116/20 159 | 42/19 42/24 43/19 | 127/8 143/12 145/1 | 196/24 | frequently [1] 17 |
| 167/16 191/11 203/25 | 45/7 47/16 53/14 | 201/20 | foreseen [2] 207/20 | fresh [1] 190/25 |
| 1/15 | 60/11 62/25 70/12 | fiscally [3] | 214/16 | Friday [3] 39/2 39/11 |
|  | 87/6 102/13 110/10 | 14/13 25/15 | rever [1] | 44/2 |
| $180 / 24$ | 15 | five [3] 61/9 105/23 | rget [1] 14 | Friday/Weekend |
| $\text { [2] } 9$ | finalised [1] 16 | 206/21 | forgets [1] 76/7 | 44/2 |
| faster [1] 90/23 | finally [4] 57/18 185/10 191/15 207/7 | $\begin{aligned} & \text { five-week [1] 206/21 } \\ & \text { fix [1] 193/6 } \end{aligned}$ | forgive [9] 40/1 59/19 99/18 123/9 135/11 | Friedman [5] 192/14 192/15 192/18 196/11 |

(68) eye - Friedman

| F | G | gi | $51 / 23 \text { 54/24 58/5 58/9 }$ | 143/14 150/2 154/3 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  | ga |  | 58/14 59/1 64/18 | 154/12 169/11 182/19 |
| 217/15 | 26 | 70/20 72/5 73/13 | 77/13 81/3 117/ | 187/23 18 |
| friend [2] 178/6 | gave [7] |  |  | [ |
| 178/23 | 105/21 114/12 129/1 | gilts [1] 68/16 | 140/25 147 |  |
| 27/1 | 136/17 173/2 175/23 | give [15] 8/22 14/1 | 161/12 161/23 187/9 | govt [1] 98/7 |
| front [12] 24/9 62 | GCSA [6] 96/18 | 78/2 105/9 106/9 | 187/17 191/6 192/19 | Gowman [5] 169 |
| 68/14 79/20 88/4 | 97/25 100/8 124/13 | 129/20 172/25 173 | 195/14 | 169/7 17 |
| 91/12 96/14 114/20 | 136/16 153/20 | 174/12 181/7 186/24 | gosh [1] 12 | 217 |
| 114/21 151/24 171/25 | GDP [2] 74/13 74/22 | 18 | got [13] | t |
|  | gearbox [2] 19/24 |  |  |  |
| fruit [1] | dor | giv | 61/15 86/22 96/14 | 123/7 165 |
| full [5] 1/9 36/25 | general [34] 5/24 8/1 | 25 | 16 | anular [1] |
| 37/11 51/6 89/20 | 8/18 11/12 12/8 12/11 |  |  | granularity [1] 14/23 |
| fulsome [1] 51/1 | 12/15 19/13 24/2 |  |  |  |
| function [2] 81/24 | 27/25 30/18 44/5 |  |  |  |
| 45/11 | 51/21 52/16 53/19 | 131/5 131/6 132/: | governance [1] | grappling [4] 75/1 |
| functioning [1] 69/23 | 54/10 58/7 58/25 | $\begin{aligned} & 131 / 5131 / 6132 / 3 \\ & 132 / 5132 / 22136 / 20 \end{aligned}$ | government [125] | 76/8 76/9 117/13 |
| fund [19] 68/18 70/23 | 80/22 81/20 94/13 | $139 / 10142 / 21150 / 2$ | 2/17 5/20 7/11 10/ | grateful [3] 1/1 |
| 71/13 71/15 72/6 76/5 | 100/8 105/12 127/1 | 156/1 159/12 161/9 | 12/1 21/25 24/8 25/2 | 129/5 161/1 |
| 164/14 164/22 166/20 | 127/14 134/24 147/11 | $163 / 7 \quad 163 / 15 \quad 167 / 1$ | 26/16 32/17 37/24 | grave [1] 53/10 |
| 167/11 167/16 175/6 | 150/13 152/18 166/20 | 177/5 188/5 190/24 | 40/5 49/1 49/5 49/5 | great [10] 9/6 43/15 |
| 176/6 189/8 189/11 | 167/11 174/24 178/16 | 200/22 203/1 | 50/5 50/7 50/9 52/21 | 55/11 61/24 63/6 |
|  |  | giving [7] | 54/20 58/3 59/15 | 63/15 75/4 106/1 |
| fu |  | 2/10 45/2 133/4 | 62/13 63/3 65/14 | 136/23 188/8 |
| 175/24 188/14 189/23 | generally [20] 3/13 | 134/15 174/2 | 65/20 68/7 68/18 70/4 | greater [9] 82/21 |
| 190/18 | 5/25 27/6 30/17 51/3 | glad [3] 162/23 | 70/6 70/22 71/7 71/11 | 92/22 101/10 117 |
| funding [42] 68/22 | 73/15 81/3 105/17 | 186/20 187/10 | 72/13 79/22 80/16 | 122/25 171/20 190/18 |
| 105/2 106/10 123/24 | 132/15 132/17 139/24 | global [1] 69/13 | 97/12 98/17 103/24 |  |
| 165/11 166/8 167/10 | 174/21 178/20 184/9 | glory [1] 27/18 | 104/1 108/8 109/24 | greatest [2] 5/14 |
| 168/11 171/5 171/15 | 185/4 187/8 190/1 | go [27] 9/19 23/1 | 10 | 26 |
| 171/18 172/14 172/20 | 202/25 205/14 211/15 | 22 52/10 65/7 | 110/19 110/22 111/13 | greatly [1] 105/7 |
| 173/7 173/16 173/24 | generated [1] | 65/15 68/20 70/3 | 111/16 113/16 118/14 | grew [1] 25/21 |
| 174/4 174/6 174/19 | generic [1] 34/17 | 70/25 75/4 76/1 | 12 | 1] |
| 174/22 174/24 176/17 | generous [6] 181/13 | 76/25 77/6 79/3 | 130/13 130/19 132/24 | group [8] |
| 177/11 179/4 179/8 | 181/24 182/13 182/23 | 100/10 105/1 107/7 | 132/24 133/1 134/13 | 31/23 31/24 40/16 |
| 179/9 179/10 179/25 | 190/6 192/8 | 110/1 110/22 127/1 | 134/15 134/17 134/18 | 4 |
| 179/25 180/11 180/16 | generousl | 144/1 177/17 188/ | 134/25 135/18 137/1 | groups [8] |
| 182/14 183/12 183/13 | generously | 193/3 197/19 199/12 | 137/20 140/20 140/22 | 16/10 23/18 78/23 |
| 185/18 186/4 |  | 20 | 14 | 0 197/12 200/2 |
| 188/11 189/1 195/1 |  | goal [1] | 143/16 145/23 147/20 | 21 |
| 195/2 208/6 | genuine [2] 82/24 | goes [4] | 1 | pthink [1] 151/9 |
| funds [4] 165/16 | 10 | 5/13 | 156/9 158/5 161/7 | g [2] 92/6 |
| 175/15 175/17 195/20 | gen |  | /11 162/18 16 | 203 |
| funnel [1] 136/22 | 182/5 189/5 189/7 | /3 41/6 42/9 49/6 | 169/18 169/23 170/6 | growth [2] 52/23 |
| funnelled [1] 136/15 | get [38] 10/21 12/17 | 49/7 53/8 54/9 5 | 170/13 170/22 171/14 | 92/1 |
| furlough [10] 6/13 | 24/7 25/1 28/13 38/10 |  |  | guarantee [10] 171/18 173/8 173/24 |
| 116/5 125/16 176/7 | 42/19 44/7 48/17 52/3 | 67/24 68/9 70/11 |  |  |
| 185/19 190/2 193/21 | 53/18 58/17 64/24 |  | 176/18 177/12 179/6 | 183/10 183/17 186/2 |
| 194/1 194/7 205/21 | 68/19 76/14 77/18 | 101/19 101/20 102/21 | 179/18 179/19 180/16 | $\begin{aligned} & 183 / 10 \\ & 187 / 9 \end{aligned}$ |
| furloughed [1] 93/7 | 83/15 86/22 89/13 | 122/24 125/8 147/23 | 181/12 181/15 181/23 | guess [2] |
| further [16] 1/15 | 90/18 92/8 92/16 | 152/19 153/6 153/8 | 182/6 182/21 183/21 | $184 / 19$ |
| 13/23 50/1 58/2 72/3 | 101/12 106/1 116/20 | 163/8 163/17 163/19 | 184/9 188/9 189/1 | guid |
| 92/7 94/9 104/8 | 150/18 151/9 160/24 |  | 9/11 191/8 191/13 |  |
| 115/23 147/9 171/19 | 160/25 162/24 177/16 | 212/22 213/7 | 195/19 201/6 201/11 | 118/14 118/15 122 |
| 177/23 179/22 189/17 | 183/8 193/19 209/10 |  | 206/7 206/8 206/20 | 195/4 198/9 |
| $2 \text { 199/2 }$ | $\begin{aligned} & 210 / 25211 / 1211 / 4 \\ & 211 / 6 \end{aligned}$ | gone [6] 48/20 | 207/25 210/15 | 198/11 198/13 198/22 |
| future [7] 2/8 16/4 75/10 145/25 146/15 |  | 116/24 118/19 122/14 | government's [21] | 199/8 200/9 200/12 |
| 186/22 192/11 | getting [6] 54/16 | 153/15 208/13 | 16/11 34/20 69/15 | $214 / 23$ |
|  | 69/22 117/25 131/16 | good [32] 1/4 19/13 21/8 21/9 31/8 34/4 | 76/24 $93 / 1$ 95/1 | ise [1] 32/8 <br> pta [1] 149/24 |
|  | 151/8 20 | 46/21 47/3 47/16 | 101/15 111/17 120/11 | Gupta's [1] 150/10 |


| G | H |  | $19$ |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| guys [1] 61/7 | has [55] 1/12 3/21 | he'll [2] |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 43/19 45/14 45/1 | head [4] 45/2 45/1 |  | 199 |
| 8] 21/2 24/6 | 61/25 62/24 63/6 79/1 | 59/11 61/14 | helpful [12] | is [33] 6/16 10/7 |
| 52/1 76/23 99/1 179/1 | 80/14 90/15 93/16 | health [67] 5/17 6/24 | 85/15 91/15 112/20 | 18/15 18/17 18/20 |
| 189/10 199/13 | 93/21 98/7 101/2 | 7/4 24/13 24/22 30/24 | 130/2 134/10 137/5 | 21/16 29/3 43/23 |
| half [6] 102/25 | 102/13 120/17 120/20 | 31/8 33/3 34/4 35/22 | 139/21 140/15 | 45/2 45/14 45/15 |
| 130/14 130/20 188/1 | 123/4 126/14 128/1 | 37/17 38/4 43/7 46/14 | 186/21 186/23 | 45/16 45/17 45/18 |
| 209/7 213/13 | 128/12 128/16 132/3 | 52/17 52/22 63/19 | helping [1] 185/8 | 45/19 45/25 47/23 |
| 退7 | 132/5 132/22 135/5 | 63/ | Heneghan [2] 149/25 | 47 |
| 130/14 130/20 | 135/9 139/17 141/5 | 84/20 95/25 101/8 | 150/10 | 79/ |
| cock [8] 31/25 | 141/9 143/16 144/16 | 101/8 101/16 105/2 | her [10] 1/17 | 128/13 128/17 |
| 114/11 127/24 152/9 | 144/22 146/15 147/1 | 106/9 107/3 108/16 | 41/10 138/11 181/11 | 141/24 163/22 164 |
| 163/22 164/12 164/20 | 152/9 161/23 161/25 | 110/2 114/21 115/6 | 193/10 193/24 205/9 | 168/9 175/2 189/19 |
| 164/25 | 163/21 178/6 185/7 | 122/12 122/13 123/6 | 20 | historically [2] 76/10 |
| hand [3] | 187/8 202/8 | 12 | H | 197 |
| 124/17 145/20 | 208 | 143/2 144/12 146/6 | 1/17 6/1 7/25 20 | ry |
| handle [2] 31/5 3 | have [242] | 148/25 152/3 154/2 | 207 | hit [1] 148/6 |
| happen [14] 4/21 | have been [1] | 160 | herd [7] | hitherto [1] |
| 16/4 26/21 27/8 37/14 | haven't [9] 48/ | 167/3 168/9 171/6 | 63/3 63/7 64/15 64/19 | HM [2] 126/9 175 |
| 58/2 60/12 61/3 75/2 | 48/20 96/14 151/12 | 175/7 175/18 175/1 | 64/21 | HM Treasury [1] |
| 127/16 205/20 210 | 166/7 176/7 203/21 | 177/8 177/9 178/2 | herd immunity [6] | 175/ |
| 210/12 210/18 | 205/3 205/9 | 179/24 183/7 195/1 | 57/14 57/15 63/3 6 | HMRC [1] |
| happened [25] 3 | having [25] 1 | 196/25 198/15 198/23 | 64/15 64/19 | HMT [34] 7/25 12/24 |
| 4/22 4/25 20/9 37/13 | 19/23 28/12 29/1 | 199/15 203/17 206/18 | here [23] 1/25 2/10 | 13/4 14/6 17/18 |
| 37/15 40/15 48/19 | 33/7 40/23 42/1 | 206/25 208 | 12/9 13/18 20/20 21 | 31/22 76/19 84/2 85 |
| 58/15 60/22 61/11 | 46/22 54/23 76/6 |  | 29/6 37/5 61/5 61/5 | 93/16 95/9 100/13 |
| 66/15 70/2 70/19 7 | 84/15 85/9 95/6 | 144/23 196/18 | 61/21 66/6 66/9 73/6 | 104/15 105/21 128/1 |
| 71/16 77/11 85/7 | 102/25 104/25 13 | healthy [3] 22/7 | 102/8 102/15 103/7 | 132/8 132/11 138/3 |
| 120/11 125/7 184/5 | 135/6 141/1 166/16 | 151/6 190/23 | 111/7 153/7 195/12 | 138/6 138/19 140/8 |
| 186/6 186/8 | 168/1 196/6 199/18 | Healthy Start | 196/7 204/25 215/2 | 142/14 142/18 142 |
| 210/21 | 2 |  | here's [2] | 143/12 144 |
| happening [29] 15/7 | he [94] 6/7 6/ | hear [9] | 56 | 145/18 148/5 164/14 |
| 26/4 30/1 30/2 30/3 | 7/21 9/2 9/16 10/7 | 11/23 42/23 43 | heroic [1] 53/12 | 164/21 165/24 193/25 |
| 32/16 38/7 48/1 56/6 | 11/3 11/6 11/14 11 | 133/18 150/17 | high [15] 44/1 50/1 | s [2] 8/2 35/1 |
| 58/18 58/24 59/6 | 11/22 12/18 19/4 | 216 | 75/11 76/10 99/10 | holiday [6] 161/19 |
| 60/23 69/24 75/6 | 27/22 27/24 28/15 | heard [8] 47/1 114/13 | 99/16 104/13 126/1 | 188/13 188/16 189/ |
| 77/22 94/15 94/25 | 32/9 32/9 35/11 40 | 137/25 158/9 163/2 | 126/ | 189/24 190/21 |
| 94/25 137/1 144/20 | 40/22 40/24 41/21 | 185/13 193/14 195/18 | 204/13 205/11 206/8 | holidays [4] 161/16 |
| 166/12 167/16 168/1 | 41/23 43/21 44/22 | hearing [6] 42/10 | 211/12 | 187/21 188/1 189/22 |
| 168/3 181/4 193/8 | 45/1 45/19 48/8 48/10 | 42/18 72/15 104/12 | higher [4] | home [17] 60/14 62/4 |
| 199/20 211/14 | 54/4 64/18 67/16 | 151/5 216/ | 112/16 126/4 212/18 | 76/21 77/1 77/3 77/2 |
| happens [3] 42/16 | 72/15 72/21 73/19 | heart [2] | highest [1] 185/14 | 163/17 163/24 167/2 |
| 184/1 184/3 | 92/7 92/10 92 | 109/10 | highlighted [1] 74/21 | 167/6 167/7 181/17 |
| happy [6] 8/2 | 92/14 92/19 93/9 | heat [1] | highly [6] 7/11 | 181/19 182/1 183/24 |
| 96/15 140/12 169/24 | 93/25 97/13 98/8 | heavily [1] 22/14 | 124/14 128/25 1 | 184/16 184/22 |
| 169/25 | 109/6 110/21 111/2 | heavy [1] 98/6 | 161/8 213 | homes [6] $95 / 2$ |
| hard [24] 10/16 16/7 | 113/11 114/12 114/13 | held [1] 41/10 | him [44] | 163/25 164/5 167 |
| 20/25 23/7 47/10 52/9 | 120/1 120/18 128/1 | Helen [1] 193/1 | 8/22 9/19 11/2 11/ | 192/23 194/25 |
| 57/24 61/19 76/14 | 128/3 128/12 128/14 | Helen Whately [1] | 7/5 22 | omework [2] |
| 79/24 108/25 146/2 | 128/16 128/17 135/18 | 193/1 | 24/9 26/12 27/16 | 143/17 |
| 146/5 148/7 160/14 | 138/19 138/20 138/22 | help [37] 2/11 59/12 | 27/24 28/7 28/12 | honest [3] |
| 160/20 168/22 172/6 | 139/17 141/8 141/9 | 77/3 98/21 114/14 | 28/14 28/21 28/23 | 169/21 |
| 182/5 182/9 185/24 | 148/10 149/17 151/9 | 114/17 114/24 115/7 | 32/8 40/22 40/25 44/7 | hope [1] 171/24 |
| 192/5 194/15 209/9 | 152/9 153/4 153/14 | 115/12 115/21 119/11 | 45/21 64/24 72/18 | hoping [1] 126/25 |
| dship [2] 20 | 154/7 154/11 154/15 | 11 | 72/19 72/21 73/16 | horizon [1] 84/14 |
| 213/14 | 155/13 155/14 155/25 | 120/1 | 73/18 92/18 92/20 | ospital [5] 60/19 |
| ] | 157/16 159/2 159/7 | 122/15 122/20 123/10 | 94/2 128/18 128/19 | 61/3 99/11 100/1 |
| [3] | 159/7 161/18 161/25 | 126/10 126 | 13 | 147 |
| 160/8 | 164/7 164/18 166/3 | 127/17 146/13 162/23 | 158/14 158/17 158/25 | [4] |
| harms [1] 149/8 | 166/4 171/24 175/5 | 169/14 188/24 192/ | 159/2 164/2 166/19 | 56/8 60/6 60/9 103/ |
|  | 175/22 189/16 210/24 | 194/19 197/3 199/2 | himself [8] 10/6 19/8 | hospitality [40] 82/10 |

(70) guys - hospitality
hospitality... [39] 85/1 86/1 86/8 86/16 86/22 87/11 87/14 87/19 88/3 88/3 88/5 88/12 88/19 89/2 115/11 115/11 115/18 116/4 116/6 116/9 116/12 116/15 118/6 118/14 118/19 118/21 119/6 119/10 121/25 122/21 123/5 123/16 126/13 148/6 197/7 198/2 198/21 200/3 200/10
hospitals [3] 58/24 95/2 155/22
hours [2] 164/9 193/11
household [2] 14/3 49/9
households [9] 84/6 114/18 115/4 117/20 122/17 123/11 124/20 162/17 199/25
housing [2] 2/16 213/17
how [67] $2 / 13 / 75 / 14$ 5/15 7/10 11/6 11/19 11/22 18/8 22/23 23/2 25/8 25/15 30/7 31/4 32/24 34/14 36/13 39/18 40/24 47/19 55/7 55/14 56/16 61/16 78/18 81/1 84/8 87/6 87/8 89/23 91/2 91/2 92/14 92/19 95/9 108/12 113/3 117/14 129/12 129/16 131/20 134/21 135/3 140/20 141/20 141/22 143/6 145/4 146/7 148/5 161/3 164/7 164/25 170/13 174/21 174/24 176/19 183/4 183/5 186/22 195/24 198/15 198/20 205/2 205/6 205/11
however [4] 8/1
43/21 164/12 172/5
huddle [3] 43/18 44/4 45/1
huge [4] 36/18 74/3
188/1 201/12
hugely [3] 28/2
109/12 145/24
hundreds [3] 74/22
122/1 129/2
hungry [1] 188/1
I
I able [1] 23/11
I act [1] 192/19

I actually [1] 186/3 I agree [4] 24/21 59/1 60/1 180/2
I always [6] 11/9
12/11 40/12 40/18 81/4 158/15
I am [1] 2/1
I and [1] 162/18
I appear [1] 177/2 I appreciate [3]
177/19 215/23 215/25
I ask [9] 26/19 27/10
72/8 78/1 131/25
163/14 169/9 187/17
189/20
I assume [1] 111/7 I attending [1]
150/21
I became [1] 25/20
I believe [2] 120/24 184/5
I believed [1] 122/7
I can [18] 9/1 23/21
32/21 48/23 51/11
97/6 104/5 114/2
157/10 166/16 167/16
169/3 169/5 181/7
194/11 195/15 198/19
199/20
I can't [19] 32/12
32/12 53/15 53/15
56/4 56/21 58/21
62/10 94/12 134/23
149/22 165/18 178/12 178/18 188/7 189/3 189/23 195/12 196/7 I cared [2] 86/1 90/9 I certainly [1] 11/9 I check [1] 167/9 I could [5] 8/23 12/12 35/25 61/20 120/5
I definitely [1] 103/8 I delivered [2] 209/2 212/4
I develop [1] 42/1 I did [8] 7/1 28/21 35/15 51/17 108/6 143/13 162/8 210/3
I didn't [20] 6/23
11/11 12/10 23/6 23/13 25/18 44/17 59/24 79/24 80/8 80/24 80/25 103/3 114/2 121/18 122/7 156/14 157/8 157/9 189/18
I do [11] 32/7 39/24 64/13 67/10 68/6 70/16 75/16 95/19 102/2 128/11 160/11 I don't [100] 3/20 4/14 4/19 6/2 9/15 12/9 20/24 22/8 32/4 32/9 33/24 35/15

35/15 36/4 38/18 42/3 I know [6] 59/10 79/6
 44/24 44/25 45/4 197/21
45/10 46/5 46/8 47/12 I look [2] 2/10 52/11 48/18 51/13 52/8 I made [4] 6/19 159/2 53/16 55/2 55/3 56/18 180/19 187/1
56/19 57/6 61/6 61/9 I make [2] 129/4 61/13 63/17 64/10 131/9
64/13 67/22 69/2 70/3 I mean [38] 12/12
72/19 73/14 75/15 14/18 17/19 18/25
77/15 84/15 84/22 21/19 24/11 25/18
176/15 184/9 186/5
186/12 188/20 199/9 201/9 204/17 205/14 206/3 208/8 213/3
I saw [7] 6/3 12/12
12/13 18/2 18/2 65/3 203/24
I say [8] 9/13 16/8 27/21 57/6 135/21 88/4 88/8 92/23 94/13 $27 / 7$ 28/9 28/13 29/14 95/19 97/14 98/24 101/12 102/2 110/3 121/4 121/24 132/14 138/20 138/20 138/24 139/17 139/25 141/16 147/1 150/16 151/4 151/11 155/15 155/15 158/3 161/2 162/1 162/8 165/21 167/25 168/18 169/2 169/21 169/22 170/1 170/15 170/19 170/20 172/13 175/23 181/7 183/25 199/6 201/9 201/13 202/14 204/4 206/14 215/13
I doubt [2] 58/21
215/24
I emphasise [1] 22/20
I ever [1] 6/2
feel [1] 11/10
I felt [5] 12/16 19/2 23/13 40/12 81/4
I forget [1] 141/24
I found [1] 19/16
I gave [1] 175/23
I generally [1] 81/3
I genuinely [2] 182/5 189/5
I guess [2] 150/7 184/19
I had [10] 17/4 19/2
28/9 40/18 40/22 41/1 63/24 136/23 136/25 158/16
I have [13] 4/23 19/5 33/5 66/5 107/10 128/11 128/18 128/19 163/15 166/24 177/13 197/2 216/6
I haven't [5] 96/14 166/7 176/7 203/21 205/3
I hope [1] 171/24
I introduced [1] 184/11
I just [9] 1/25 88/19
103/3 110/1 138/5 182/2 188/20 191/4 206/5
I knew [1] 191/20

29/20 30/10 30/12 I see [1] 35/16
35/4 44/25 46/11 48/4 I sent [2] 85/11 114/3
48/4 48/13 50/22 I shall [3] 107/13
60/15 90/13 96/10 163/3 216/17
98/24 99/13 100/17
102/23 104/5 142/24
146/6 146/6 152/17
152/18 170/5 202/7
204/17 205/14
I mention [1] 179/3
mentioned [1]
144/20
I might [2] 44/20
75/24
I misinterpreted [1]
143/25
I move [1] 213/5
I need [1] 45/15
I needed [2] 12/16 103/7
I never [1] 80/23
I only [1] 9/18
I participated [2] 11/8 19/10
I probably [1] 131/13 I very [1] 129/4
I propose [1] 79/10 I vividly [1] 53/24
I put [2] 159/6 188/11 I want [5] 37/4 40/6

| I raise [1] 121/18 | $162 / 5$ 187/19 199/19 |
| :--- | :--- |

I rarely [1] 103/5 I wanted [1] 80/24
I reach [1] 216/11 I was [43] 12/14
I read [1] 112/4
I recall [4] 84/15 85/6
85/9 169/24
12/15 19/1 23/13
23/22 25/17 29/17
32/17 33/13 33/19
33/23 56/18 63/17
69/3 69/21 71/21
I recollect [3] 72/23
72/24 138/23
I referred [1] 198/9
64/14 66/12 67/2
89/10 96/7 139/15
152/23 211/16
I represent [2]
196/17 199/4
I said [46] 4/25 5/1
6/14 7/13 15/14 18/25 20/5 28/10 33/24
37/12 37/16 38/1 $\quad 113 / 25$ 129/23 150/6
40/14 42/21 42/25
51/19 54/21 62/11

76/14 80/7 85/23 99/5 I went [2] 137/5
102/5 111/25 122/1 151/4
124/22 129/23 154/11 I will [2] 187/1 216/10

I won't [2] 75/4 93/4
I would [23] 8/16 10/2 11/20 17/25 25/5 28/14 39/21 55/4 71/22 76/11 77/13 89/13 90/3 103/6 103/6 135/9 135/16 155/5 155/11 160/18 178/8 181/22 184/22
I wouldn't [9] 9/18 21/3 26/9 35/6 39/16 40/21 61/12 123/4 170/9
I wrote [2] 108/18 109/1
I'd [24] 3/3 8/22
14/18 14/22 18/10 21/10 23/11 23/13 26/11 26/20 28/6 28/12 29/10 32/8 35/7 37/18 58/15 89/23 95/20 169/23 169/25 180/19 215/2 215/18 I'II [2] 56/21 216/12 I'm [109] 2/10 3/22 5/1 9/19 10/25 24/7 25/1 27/3 27/3 28/13 32/4 37/5 39/21 40/22 44/23 45/11 47/3 48/4 49/6 49/7 51/1 51/3 51/13 52/4 52/11 57/15 64/3 74/9 75/11 80/8 81/1 83/4 88/25 96/15 96/20 101/12 102/5 105/10 107/12 110/25 111/7 111/25 112/5 115/1 121/24 128/11 129/5 132/16 132/16 132/18 134/3 134/21 136/3 140/12 140/18 141/3 143/23 144/15 146/19 147/11 151/15 151/16 154/19 157/3 161/1 162/23 163/8 163/8 163/17 163/19 164/10 167/21 169/20 169/20 171/2 171/6 172/9 178/21 178/23 179/20 180/2 180/22 181/1 181/1 181/5 184/13 186/15
186/20 186/20 186/21 187/10 187/12 189/18 191/3 192/11 194/11 194/11 194/13 195/5 195/11 196/1 196/13 196/17 197/8 206/6 207/15 214/23 215/15 215/16
I'm afraid [5] 163/8 189/18 194/11 196/13 215/16

I've [41] $2 / 53 / 204 / 23$ 5/4 24/4 28/6 38/17
40/12 40/17 42/5 45/6 47/11 51/16 73/15 75/19 80/23 81/13 90/11 108/23 120/22 124/21 127/9 131/13 141/21 156/16 156/21 156/22 158/14 168/18 IFG [2] 136/7 160/21 168/22 187/5 191/3 ignore [1] 198/5 194/16 195/21 200/5 II [1] 74/23 203/1 204/8 204/25 ill [1] 32/1
207/18 213/12 213/24 I've said [2] 4/23 80/23
I.suppose [1] 68/16 Ian [3] 138/16 138/18 141/8
Ian Diamond [3] 138/16 138/18 141/8 ICU [4] 55/11 60/4 61/1 61/18
ICUs [2] 56/5 56/6 idea [3] 127/4 137/23 138/14
ideally [1] 146/17 identification [1] 62/24
identified [3] 37/2
178/22 202/19
identities [1] 129/21
identity [1] 129/18 ie [1] 185/21
if [121] $8 / 23$ 14/6 14/12 15/22 20/9 25/14 26/21 27/17 28/2 29/17 31/18 32/4 34/7 35/2 35/3 38/5 38/9 41/2 46/7 46/18 46/22 47/19 48/13 48/14 48/17 49/3 49/22 54/24 55/21 56/23 56/25 58/2 58/15 59/11 59/19 60/13 61/4 61/13 61/18 62/8 70/15 71/12 71/15 75/12 75/24 76/25 78/5 79/3 79/25 80/22 81/25 82/5 83/5 83/11 84/3 85/6 85/9 86/11 88/7 88/9 88/9 90/14 93/8 97/5 98/11 98/14 99/21 103/5 105/7 108/3 109/11 112/20 120/5 121/22 122/8 135/11 135/12 140/16 143/10 144/5 146/15 147/9 147/18 147/19 151/6 151/9 158/2 162/4 167/9 169/2 169/4 169/19 169/23 169/25 170/23 171/1 173/15 174/11 177/22 implausible [1] 30/10 inappropriate [1]

182/22 184/10
implementation [7] 49/13 59/15 63/4 66/22 98/23 124/24 164/16
implemented [14] 21/8 52/19 54/18 55/1 65/12 115/19 120/23
147/10 172/5 173/21 176/11 182/23 200/13 illustrates [1] 119/18 $214 / 8$
illustrative [1] 146/20 implementing [3] imagine [2] 17/25 54/11 102/24 214/19 89/13
IMF [1] 143/22
immediate [1] 84/18 immediately [7] 33/10 49/17 65/20 76/1 85/25 86/6 168/1 imminently [2] 49/2 54/16
immunity [7] 57/14 57/15 63/3 63/7 64/15 64/19 64/21
impact [63] 6/6 7/3
7/5 14/10 14/13 16/3
16/13 17/15 18/7
24/18 37/20 38/15
55/8 55/20 55/23
57/25 67/24 68/1
71/24 72/5 74/4 74/7 74/13 74/15 74/23
75/2 75/10 76/5 79/7 83/25 84/1 85/20
85/22 86/2 86/6 90/6 94/14 97/17 99/2 100/5 103/11 108/1 109/16 118/2 125/20 126/6 126/18 155/21 159/10 159/13 159/14 165/9 181/16 183/23 impression [4] 45/20 200/3 203/14 203/17 51/3 51/7 52/16 203/18 204/10 204/11 impropriety [1] 40/3 204/14 205/15 214/4 improve [4] 21/9 33/4 impacted [6] 75/7 75/7 82/9 89/19 184/23 189/10 impacts [26] 6/22 7/2 15/1 15/6 15/11 16/8 32/19 33/3 33/8 33/9 36/6 46/16 74/21 76/1 80/6 82/24 84/17 84/18 84/20 92/21 143/18 144/3 149/10 149/11 158/15 203/7 impaired [2] 69/23 75/8
imperative [1] 92/15 Imperial [3] 67/3 67/10 101/5

56/16 186/22
improved [9] 14/25
15/15 19/19 20/12
20/22 58/14 58/22
59/2 140/2
improvement [1] 19/20
improving [1] 20/4
inaccessible [1]
214/18
inactivity [15] 201/24
202/8 202/15 203/22
204/6 204/9 204/14
204/16 204/19 205/2 206/1 207/17 207/19 207/25 208/7
implement [10] 6/12 $\quad 198 / 4$
24/10 49/8 62/15 64/8 inappropriately [1] 66/8 66/18 111/14 159/25
inaudible [1] 59/5
incentivise [1] 167/6
incidence [2] 167/5
211/12
include [1] 159/15
included [6] 39/12
51/15 109/3 110/12
111/4 164/8
including [14] 58/19
66/10 84/16 106/5
108/7 115/15 118/9
118/16 143/1 174/15
193/16 204/23 206/2
210/2
income [3] 181/18 181/20 208/20
incomes [8] 82/13
89/6 185/8 188/23
191/22 192/10 213/7 214/1
incompetent [1] 46/3 inconclusive [1] 39/9 incorporated [1] 203/3
increase [13] 15/4 57/3 92/9 95/16 98/2
98/10 103/11 124/15
176/11 180/15 190/22
194/4 194/8
increased [13]
164/24 167/5 183/19
191/2 199/4 199/24
201/22 202/5 202/23
206/11 207/13 213/15
213/17
increases [1] 201/24
increasing [1]
172/18
increasingly [1]
54/15
incredible [1] 176/2 incredibly [12] 7/17
46/12 46/17 70/18
130/2 146/2 146/4
148/7 160/14 192/7
197/15 199/19
incremental [1]
182/8
incrementally [1] 54/17
indeed [52] 5/4 5/8
7/16 10/8 17/24 35/13
35/16 40/20 46/10
52/20 56/9 59/17 70/1
77/25 85/3 86/10
95/23 115/13 116/5
117/12 118/13 120/16
132/3 138/5 138/22
141/8 144/23 146/21
147/1 148/2 149/3

149/14 156/18 160/13
indeed... [18] 161/5
168/25 174/17 176/3
176/9 176/11 179/13
179/16 180/7 180/10
180/22 182/12 182/17
190/17 190/22 208/21 212/19 212/25
independent [12]
16/11 16/13 93/1 117/11 135/13 140/7 140/9 143/14 143/16 144/5 144/24 162/12
INDEX [1] 216/23
indicated [1] 185/10
indication [1] 14/15
indicative [2] 141/10
170/3
individual [11] 3/14
32/6 52/5 104/20
105/20 106/23 118/17 118/17 124/8 189/3 214/19
individuals [4] 5/5
116/14 178/4 200/2
indoor [9] 114/18
115/11 115/18 116/8
118/6 119/5 119/10
123/16 200/10
industry [8] 77/9
116/6 117/6 117/18
118/14 197/11 198/12
198/21
ineffective [1] 196/3
inefficiency [2] 45/24
47/5
ineligible [1] 208/22
inequalities [2] 197/1 199/3
inequality [4] 184/15
184/17 184/20 185/1
inevitably [1] 56/3
infection [9] 56/7
60/5 126/6 126/14
126/18 147/4 149/1
167/4 199/5
infections [1] 167/3
inferentially [1]
108/23
influence [1] 44/8
influenced [2] 68/6 72/12
info [1] 39/7
inform [1] 205/12
informal [2] 25/13
138/10
informally [1] 25/10
information [28] 6/5
9/25 10/2 10/4 14/2 14/16 14/23 16/20 17/14 19/3 19/25 20/5 25/5 43/9 53/18 55/11 55/16 63/18 63/20

91/15 130/1 141/19 142/19 142/20 143/11 144/3 202/3 202/22 informed [2] 68/6 206/24
inherent [2] 115/3 117/19
inherently [2] 132/21 151/10
initial [1] 187/24 initially [2] 189/1 189/4
initiative [1] 172/6
initiatives [1] 208/2 innovation [1]
187/10
input [11] 7/21 11/11
20/2 23/11 90/4 96/6 111/22 117/7 125/12
135/10 207/5
INQ000114451 [1] 201/22
INQ000182359 [1] 31/18
INQ000217057 [1] 177/13
INQ000232069 [2]
13/17 83/20
INQ000232085 [1] 86/24
INQ000232115 [1] 17/8
INQ000232168 [1] 93/12
INQ000232181 [1] 98/3
INQ000235213 [1] 181/9
INQ000235261 [1] 138/12
INQ000236583 [1] 78/5
INQ000236584 [1] 91/20
INQ000236585 [2] 86/11 88/6 INQ000236586 [1] 38/23
INQ000236594 [1] 43/3
INQ000236674 [1] 1/12
INQ000273747 [1] 171/10
INQ000273897 [1] 193/4
INQ000280042 [1] 34/8
INQUIRY [27] $1 / 7$
1/19 2/11 3/6 4/3 4/5 4/13 18/12 29/5 35/17 63/12 120/18 127/24
128/13 128/17 128/22
128/23 158/20 158/22

163/21 181/8 181/11 186/12 186/24 187/23
196/23 217/5
Inquiry's [1] 5/6
inside [3] 37/23 71/4 139/24
insofar [1] 104/14
insolvency [1] 15/11
instance [3] 3/23 10/1 48/1
instead [4] 189/23
194/2 194/8 195/3
instinct [1] 91/25
institute [5] 8/7 10/18
135/18 137/11 141/23
instituted [1] 113/14
institution [2] 4/4 137/22
institutions [1] 94/17
instruct [1] 145/7
instructed [2] 177/2 196/17
integrate [1] 146/16 intense [1] 150/20
interactions [3] 23/9
169/11 211/3
interest [3] 74/3
102/21 160/18
interesting [2] 44/23 92/4
interests [4] 7/12 7/18 9/17 83/13
intergovernmental
[1] 175/4
interlocutors [1] 5/9 internal [1] 16/17 internally [1] 139/7 international [7]
81/11 82/18 91/1 92/4 108/13 108/15 192/8
internationally [3]
53/19 94/15 117/17
interrupt [3] 36/12
57/15 191/3
intervention [9]
13/16 30/24 66/1
72/25 79/5 122/5
126/20 128/1 144/12
interventions [14]
6/13 14/8 24/10 25/3
39/6 50/1 65/3 65/24
83/20 123/15 149/8
160/6 176/6 195/16
intimate [1] 196/9
into [67] 4/11 5/19
10/11 11/12 11/21
14/21 16/2 17/16
17/23 18/5 20/18 25/1
30/8 38/13 40/21
48/20 51/18 52/4
52/10 59/12 63/9 70/3 70/5 71/8 75/15 75/16 80/10 81/5 90/5 91/16

102/14 104/22 104/25
106/17 106/20 107/7
109/18 109/22 110/20
118/19 135/6 135/10
136/1 137/5 140/24
151/8 152/19 153/7
153/8 153/15 154/2
157/9 172/1 182/7
182/7 182/8 192/17
193/2 199/4 202/12
203/3 203/15 207/12 208/7
introduce [3] 111/12 211/17 213/3
introduced [13]
125/13 148/13 173/6 173/24 184/11 185/2 185/3 194/24 210/13 210/13 210/14 211/11 214/10
introduction [1]
153/19
intuitive [1] 42/7
investing [3] 57/4
94/16 207/25
investment [3] 69/13
143/22 202/10
invited [1] 151/3
involved [19] 21/18
23/18 42/6 97/6
105/13 108/22 111/2
113/8 115/20 120/13
165/22 166/14 166/23
167/18 168/19 168/21
193/17 194/12 196/8
involvement [3]
104/15 164/11 165/4
involving [1] 108/20
Ipsos [2] 82/19 82/20
Ireland [5] 172/20
174/6 176/4 176/10 179/8
is [379]
is: [1] $86 / 22$
is: we've [1] 86/22
isn't [5] 13/21 109/25
128/14 185/22 186/11
isolate [5] 181/14
182/1 209/17 211/7
211/13
isolated [2] 181/20
184/16
isolating [3] 89/18
185/3 210/9
isolation [16] 14/4
15/2 49/9 49/9 119/15
181/16 181/18 183/23 184/10 184/23 208/19
208/20 208/25 209/22
211/23 212/3
isolators [1] 209/6

101/12 102/7 102/13
issue [50] 3/5 7/4
34/1 37/7 45/13 57/13

89/17 91/4 94/23
99/11 99/24 100/23
104/10 104/12 104/15 107/2 114/23 115/2 117/14 117/21 118/1 119/9 120/16 121/9 123/13 124/17 125/8
126/16 130/24 132/22 137/10 143/3 160/7
161/15 161/15 161/22
178/5 179/1 179/19
181/6 183/22 184/15 188/6 192/25 208/19 211/25
issued [1] 198/11 issues [22] 5/18 7/10 25/15 29/3 29/4 40/7 47/21 57/16 63/16 69/4 76/17 78/17 95/4
95/5 100/21 103/13
106/3 106/7 132/25
137/14 137/15 196/6 it [685]
it's [150] 2/6 2/8 4/10 4/21 8/13 9/5 9/12 9/18 16/24 17/4 19/11 20/19 21/2 21/4 21/8 21/20 22/20 23/7 26/22 27/17 29/5 29/11 29/21 29/21 30/10 32/5 32/5 32/10 $33 / 1534 / 834 / 1135 / 3$ 35/15 36/4 36/18 38/16 39/22 40/4 42/11 42/15 42/21 46/11 47/3 47/10 47/12 47/16 51/16 51/19 52/9 53/9 54/1 58/9 61/18 67/5 70/15 70/16 71/11 71/20 74/2 75/5 75/19 75/24 78/6 78/8 79/24 80/8 80/9 81/15 83/19 83/21 83/21 86/11 86/14 87/12 88/11 88/21 90/10 91/13 92/25 96/15 98/4 99/14 99/20 104/9 105/6 109/18 110/18 111/17 112/16 116/16 118/3 119/23 120/5 122/19 122/24 124/15 128/21 129/16 129/25 130/18 132/6 132/8 136/17 136/23 138/5 139/21 140/19 141/3 142/8 142/17 142/24 145/21 146/2 146/19 148/3 153/4 153/5 155/15 161/11 168/18 168/21 169/1 169/24 171/11 171/24 172/18 173/6 173/7 175/23 182/9 183/16 184/19
it's... [18] 185/24
190/11 190/13 191/20 192/5 193/4 194/15 194/19 195/12 201/21 208/8 209/23 210/10 210/17 210/19 211/18 216/1 216/8
Italy [3] 60/18 60/19 153/2
item [3] 120/6 128/13 128/17
iterate [2] 16/15 52/2 iteration [2] 52/7 173/5
iterative [3] 11/17 21/24 45/9
its [31] $2 / 12$ 10/19 27/18 50/11 64/2 77/10 94/8 98/22 100/5 101/6 101/9 112/1 112/23 117/22 119/21 124/24 133/5 143/17 148/7 150/4 154/25 156/15 156/25 161/13 166/9 180/16 186/16 192/7 197/5 197/25 204/22
itself [25] 30/5 30/5 33/25 45/10 53/13 68/18 70/23 72/7 84/14 89/9 97/21
100/11 109/21 125/10 133/16 133/17 133/23 134/1 134/7 142/22 143/10 147/18 147/21 179/23 205/18

## J

Jacobs [4] 208/13
208/16 215/17 217/21
January [8] 2/15
164/21 167/1 167/8
167/10 167/22 168/4 194/22
January 2018 [1] 2/15
January 2020 [1] 194/22
January 2021 [2] 167/1 167/22
Javid [1] 2/20
JBC [1] 124/4
job [19] 7/17 10/3
11/9 35/14 39/24 41/19 72/21 73/16 89/8 134/24 139/25 140/10 145/17 158/14 177/6 199/12 199/16 199/18 211/18
jobs [34] 6/12 75/7 81/23 82/4 82/7 82/15 82/24 85/16 85/17

85/18 86/5 89/4 89/5 89/7 114/11 114/16 116/14 117/5 117/8 117/14 118/25 120/25 122/6 127/12 127/19 127/21 159/13 161/4 185/5 186/17 195/8 197/15 197/19 199/21 jog [1] 111/1 Johnson [4] 4/4 177/16 178/9 178/14 Joint [1] 94/16 jointly [1] 112/3 Jonathan [1] 124/12 Jonathan Van-Tam [1] 124/12
Josephs [1] 1/18 journalist [2] 31/1 131/1
journalistic [1] 129/17
judge [2] 149/7 178/1 judged [1] 191/25 July [26] 2/18 2/21 86/17 87/19 88/5 88/13 95/15 114/10 114/13 114/16 119/12 119/13 119/24 120/6 121/14 122/13 128/7 171/19 173/6 173/25 178/22 178/24 179/3 179/3 179/5 210/24 July 2020 [2] 178/22 178/24
July 2021 [1] 171/19 June [36] 19/19 38/25 86/18 87/24 88/14 89/2 95/9 95/18 96/1 96/16 96/21 97/23 97/24 97/24 98/19 98/22 99/6 99/13 100/9 100/14 101/15 103/20 107/20 108/19 109/14 112/10 114/10 119/2 138/7 keen [2] 84/21 152/22 153/18 161/22 178/21
163/23 189/18 189/20 keep [6] 74/10 99/3 189/22
June 2020 [1] 163/23
June 2021 [2] 189/18
189/22
junior [1] 2/15
just [134] 1/25 3/3
6/12 6/17 6/20 6/24
8/10 16/16 16/25

21/10 24/8 25/5 26/2 26/6 26/21 26/23 27/8 28/14 29/5 29/21 30/13 32/19 33/3 33/11 34/5 38/3 38/9 38/17 39/7 41/6 41/12 41/18 45/1 45/2 46/24 49/17 50/4 50/24 51/3 | $51 / 2554 / 556 / 22$ | kind [8] 16/24 34/19 |
| :--- | :--- |

58/10 59/7 61/8 62/7 62/25 64/24 67/6 68/19 70/3 70/15 71/15 73/3 73/21 74/11 75/14 75/15 78/1 78/5 83/5 83/18 88/18 88/19 91/4 99/3 99/18 99/21 100/16 103/3 103/5 105/11 110/1 110/24 112/5 120/5 122/24 123/12 124/7 127/8 127/10 130/22 131/25 132/15 132/16 134/19 136/13 138/5 139/14 139/17 141/19 142/2 144/4 144/15 144/19 144/20 146/3 146/4 146/24 155/11 164/12 168/10 173/10 174/1 174/4 174/15 176/10 177/16 180/6 181/2 182/2 184/22 188/15 188/20 189/19 191/4 192/15 193/18 193/19 194/18 194/18 195/4 195/6 196/4 196/7 198/3 198/4 198/21 205/6 206/5 210/20 211/2 212/9 216/7
justice [5] 7/4 82/15
163/15 169/10 197/15
justification [1] 154/24
justified [4] 153/22
154/2 154/11 156/1 justify [1] 155/17

K
KC [12] 163/12 177/1
187/16 192/18 196/15
200/19 217/7 217/11
217/13 217/15 217/17
217/19

102/3 127/21 144/1
192/16
keeping [2] 206/12 207/14
Keith [15] 1/3 1/24
6/18 46/7 71/8 75/24 87/11 107/17 131/2
133/17 140/14 144/18 189/16 191/5 216/5
kept [3] 78/4 106/21 213/7
key [11] 23/20 24/2 59/13 59/13 69/4 163/24 167/4 168/7 168/12 196/4 211/23
killed [1] 138/13

37/23 60/24 135/21 141/24 194/7 212/12 kindly [1] 160/21
kinds [1] 149/14
King's [1] 193/15
King's Counsel [1] 193/15
Kingdom [4] 90/25
123/14 176/4 186/19
knew [5] 60/7 60/8
152/9 162/21 191/20
know [108] 10/23
18/24 20/11 21/2 23/6 25/19 25/21 25/24 larger [1] 172/21 25/25 26/2 27/3 27/10 last [9] 10/20 10/21 28/18 32/4 32/6 32/24 44/7 45/21 47/1 65/4 33/1 33/6 33/20 33/24 89/3 106/3 189/16 36/1 38/16 41/8 42/4 lastly [2] 106/15 42/25 44/19 44/22 208/13
47/5 47/6 47/8 48/4 late [2] 96/21 149/15 48/7 48/8 48/24 49/14 later [24] 10/3 15/21 51/13 51/13 52/10 53/16 53/24 54/1 54/2 55/22 56/16 57/1 58/16 58/19 58/23 59/5 59/8 59/10 60/15 61/13 62/10 63/17 64/13 67/9 72/11 75/5 75/6 76/4 76/7 76/10 77/20 79/6 79/16 85/16 96/5 97/4
100/16 101/25 103/7 104/11 108/23 114/9 120/20 128/7 128/12 129/16 131/12 136/3 136/4 138/20 138/20 144/17 144/19 145/15 22/2 24/23 45/9 64/4 151/8 152/22 159/16 209/16
165/7 166/12 169/2 leak [1] 27/25 172/15 174/11 183/25 leant [1] 109/20 185/12 185/25 186/14 learn [1] 2/7 188/7 188/9 194/20 197/21 201/9 201/16 205/8 206/21 215/9 knowing [1] 137/5 knowledge [4] 8/24 63/22 134/16 165/23 known [8] 2/13 46/4 129/19 142/15 195/9 197/1 201/12 203/19 knows [1] 36/20 L
labour [13] 15/1
74/17 74/24 90/6 90/16 181/15 183/22 194/9 194/22 201/24 203/9 205/15 205/19 lack [8] 19/18 46/1 131/19 165/2 168/16 170/3 172/11 178/2 lady [18] 1/4 22/21 62/18 128/21 129/7 163/13 168/24 169/8

176/22 187/12 196/10 198/7 200/14 208/11 208/14 215/19 215/21 216/19
laid [2] 158/12 207/2
land [1] 43/14
lane [1] 61/22
language [3] 69/10
84/19 134/23
large [2] 9/8 94/24
largely [6] 24/7 24/8
25/2 37/16 56/23
165/13

47/24 48/21 50/15 50/23 54/6 54/6 56/11
66/8 66/19 76/13
85/18 85/19 87/14
94/23 97/23 104/12
136/4 164/20 179/1
189/18 194/17 209/12
latterly [1] 128/9
law [2] 164/5 196/17
lay [1] 28/22
lead [8] 1/7 20/7
24/23 54/6 56/3 63/8
63/19 217/5
leader [1] 2/25
leading [6] 11/17
leant [1] 109/20
learn [1] $2 / 7$
learned [5] 59/3
178/6 178/23 185/12 186/10
least [17] 15/6 15/25
18/3 22/13 25/14 31/1
37/2 37/21 55/20
65/11 68/13 68/17
102/25 116/20 162/19
191/15 215/4
leave [7] 27/15 27/23
28/4 47/19 47/20 136/13 215/18
led [10] 44/11 45/22 53/20 63/9 69/21
105/14 107/4 126/15 204/9 204/16
Lee [2] 187/22 188/6
Lee Cain [2] 187/22 188/6
legally [1] 77/7
legislation [1] 215/5
leisure [1] 82/11
lend [1] 29/6
length [1] 48/12
lent [1] 59/25
Leslie [1] 196/16
Leslie Thomas [1] 196/16
less [5] 84/5 108/14 131/13 132/19 184/23
lessons [4] 2/7 59/3 185/12 186/10
let [2] 194/18 197/19
let's [7] 12/19 48/17 76/16 81/16 88/6 146/1 198/25
letter [17] 85/11 86/3 86/9 86/24 86/25 89/4 90/10 109/1 114/3 177/14 177/20 178/12 178/13 179/14 180/4 180/5 180/12
level [16] 15/10 15/11 19/11 22/19 43/13 75/11 99/4 104/13 118/18 137/20 140/11 148/12 154/4 154/13 172/21 184/4
levels [6] 74/23
74/25 75/10 126/2
193/13 210/9
life [9] 27/1 32/20
33/9 36/3 37/22 83/16
85/2 101/13 190/13
lifted [1] 78/19
lifting [3] 115/8
115/22 200/7
light [5] 73/13 91/9
115/2 140/23 161/11
like [42] $3 / 36 / 13$
15/22 16/10 18/1
18/10 24/19 35/6
40/24 46/18 58/15
74/17 76/11 81/25 98/13 98/15 103/10 108/15 111/21 116/4 117/12 117/13 117/18 125/16 133/20 134/19 136/4 136/6 146/17
168/2 174/9 176/7
178/8 181/22 190/25
192/3 192/4 206/19
206/23 211/18 211/20 215/6
liked [4] 11/19 22/6 58/12 138/14
likelihood [1] 152/12
likely [13] 8/3 14/10 24/17 55/21 68/1 101/9 101/10 116/20 124/14 127/16 145/6 156/7 181/20
likes [1] 46/17
limit [2] 65/15 201/6 limited [2] 118/10

191/4
limits [1] 131/7
line [4] 33/10 53/14 56/12 183/14
lines [2] 145/21 191/6
links [1] 203/21 liquidity [1] 70/5 list [1] 41/3
listened [1] 158/9 little [4] 78/2 83/5 92/7 143/23
live [1] 28/11
livelihoods [6] 75/8
81/23 160/24 185/5
186/17 199/11
lives [2] 77/3 82/24
living [2] 25/22 26/25 Liz [1] 2/25
Liz Truss [1] 2/25
lobbies [1] 29/15
local [24] 2/17 108/8 126/1 126/3 126/15 152/15 152/20 152/23 153/14 154/3 154/12 165/13 165/15 195/22 209/8 213/14 213/17 214/15 214/18 214/22 215/7 215/8 215/10 215/14
localised [2] 153/3 153/6
lock [2] 35/3 55/20 lockdown [56] 8/6 10/17 13/11 13/20 15/18 15/24 16/2 17/1 17/10 17/15 22/16 24/18 31/5 31/13 34/15 36/19 37/9 37/15 48/18 50/13 52/14 63/1 72/4 74/4 74/19 75/22 76/18 76/22 78/10 82/10 92/2 101/6 101/9 134/19 144/25 148/15 150/12 150/13 153/9 153/15 153/23 154/15 156/11 156/18 157/7 157/9 158/8 158/11 158/19 159/5 159/16 172/5 202/4 202/21 212/10 213/9
lockdowns [7] 5/22 35/1 35/21 37/21 126/15 146/1 156/23
locked [1] 70/11 locking [2] 72/10 73/12
logistical [1] 35/25
logistics [1] 3/12
Lombardelli [2]
138/6 145/3
Lombardy [3] 60/17
60/22 60/22

London [9] 59/18
70/11 72/10 72/23 73/3 73/7 73/12 73/20 73/21
Ione [1] 93/25
loneliness [1] 212/21
long [37] 4/21 46/16
74/16 75/2 84/13
84/14 90/11 123/3
129/9 148/18 151/7
198/10 200/21 200/23
201/1 201/4 201/4
201/10 202/1 202/4 202/22 202/24 203/17 203/17 203/20 203/23 204/6 204/11 204/19 204/23 205/10 205/12 206/10 206/12 207/10 207/10 208/5
Long Covid [21] 84/13 84/14 200/21 200/23 201/1 201/4 202/1 202/4 202/22 202/24 203/17 203/20 203/23 204/6 204/19 204/23 205/10 205/12 206/10 206/12 207/10 long-stand [1] 90/11 long-standing [1] 123/3
long-term [6] 46/16 74/16 75/2 201/4 203/17 207/10
longer [3] 148/14 168/7 168/13
look [33] 2/10 12/19 13/14 14/6 14/12 17/6 17/8 20/19 28/24 31/18 41/2 52/11 56/12 56/15 56/15 59/1 66/6 67/7 78/5 81/9 83/18 88/6 88/7 91/4 98/3 99/10 144/7 147/2 169/4 170/1 179/15 214/21 215/12
looked [2] 57/19 99/25
looking [9] 59/21
105/8 110/25 131/11 157/3 181/1 181/1 194/5 194/18
lose [3] 99/18 134/10 181/17
loss [1] 181/20
lost [4] 2/2 15/2 77/2 77/14
lot [11] 2/6 27/15
27/23 28/7 56/5 60/17 68/9 89/15 120/20
135/2 144/6
lots [6] 23/19 28/19
36/6 72/15 72/16
157/24
loved [1] 2/2

Iow [7] 126/2 162/15 193/13 199/3 199/16 211/1 214/11
lower [4] 89/6 116/14 197/12 213/7
lowest [7] 82/13
185/8 188/22 191/22 192/10 208/19 214/1
lucky [1] 160/15 lunch [2] 29/17 107/11

## M

MacDougall [1] 130/5
made [67] 6/16 6/19 11/13 11/24 15/18 19/16 21/6 21/12 23/13 23/25 24/18 25/11 25/12 28/22 30/1 30/6 30/7 30/25 33/6 36/16 36/21 46/7 50/20 51/7 51/22 52/17 54/23 59/16 98/8 98/17 98/18 102/12 108/3 109/5 109/13 112/10 112/15 113/13 116/8 118/5 120/19 123/17 124/3 132/10 133/14 135/5 135/17 142/15 144/13 147/4 147/24 147/24 153/20 154/7 155/20 159/2 174/19 176/15 178/9 178/14 179/21 180/19 187/1 190/19 195/17 199/23 209/3 madness [1] 115/1 main [1] 159/18 maintains [1] 187/6 Majesty's [5] 1/17 6/1 7/25 205/9 207/11 major [5] 25/12 69/19 March [33] 13/3 75/22 83/11 108/10 majority [4] 52/19 52/20 94/7 193/12 make [53] 5/8 6/7 7/18 9/16 10/7 10/12 12/18 20/10 21/16 22/11 29/5 33/6 35/2 35/3 35/8 36/8 40/24 41/17 43/14 47/8 48/4 58/12 63/12 65/22 88/21 102/9 102/13 108/10 115/24 119/2 125/21 129/4 131/9 146/24 151/2 158/14 161/18 170/7 170/8 177/8 180/19 192/16 195/12 198/16 199/13 206/22 209/9 210/8 210/18 212/12 212/18 Marcus Rashford's 213/1 215/6
maker [2] 9/5 9/14
makers [1] 98/8
makes [6] 33/25
83/10 88/8 108/24 114/7 138/1
making [55] 4/19 6/4 6/20 6/23 9/10 9/21 11/2 11/18 12/4 18/13 20/4 20/23 21/18 21/24 22/5 27/2 32/18 33/19 33/23 41/16 45/6 51/6 51/19 60/12 65/18 68/2 70/10 72/7 84/11 92/15 94/13 95/24 99/10 101/17 113/16 132/16 133/3 134/5 136/2 143/4 145/1 152/25 158/2 162/10 168/6 168/11 170/2 170/11 178/1 179/24 182/24 187/3 188/8 195/15 204/3 manage [1] 94/17 Manchester [1] 101/5
mandated [1] 193/23
mandatory [2] 60/13 62/3
manifest [1] 205/18 many [43] 7/1 7/2 7/18 10/4 12/10 18/8 29/1 29/1 35/17 35/24
42/5 48/5 48/5 48/5 48/14 48/14 55/14
61/9 61/16 72/21 76/1 82/7 89/17 108/4 117/8 123/15 133/9 135/7 140/9 143/7 143/13 144/4 146/5 146/6 161/6 176/10 208/24 209/21 210/20 211/20 212/16 212/19 214/18

13/12 13/19 20/8 20/17 22/17 23/20 23/21 24/12 48/2 48/25 49/11 49/20 52/14 52/22 62/3 63/14 64/1 64/9 66/5 66/14 68/12 76/19 104/17 105/3 125/5 144/19 200/25 201/1 209/3 209/12 211/23 212/4
March 2020 [3]
104/17 200/25 211/23
March 2021 [1] 201/1
Marcus [2] 161/17 187/24
Marcus Rashford [1]
161/17
[1] 187/24
mark [2] 143/17
mark... [1] 171/9
market [14] 68/15
68/16 70/13 70/14
72/6 73/13 74/24 90/6
90/16 123/7 201/24
203/9 205/15 205/19
market-sensitive [1] 123/7
marketplace [1] 68/24
markets [7] 16/22 17/2 69/11 69/11 69/22 70/24 73/19
marking [1] 93/19
masks [1] 133/25 mass [3] 49/10 66/10 212/12
massively [1] 150/14 material [10] 1/15 3/5 10/15 12/20 66/24 117/17 117/18 145/5 160/1 216/9
materials [2] 194/17 196/6
matter [21] 4/7 30/8 56/24 69/17 74/3
82/15 91/23 104/11
109/24 110/18 123/13
124/16 128/14 128/21
164/5 177/9 177/11
189/4 191/4 197/14
199/8
mattered [1] 9/5
matters [8] 18/9
22/20 26/15 30/7
128/21 145/19 170/7 170/8
maximum [2] 61/17 160/5
may [67] 2/14 4/5 4/9 11/17 20/17 30/15 32/6 33/9 42/24 50/12 53/17 61/10 77/17 81/1 81/10 81/10 84/15 84/19 85/10 85/15 85/23 86/9 86/19 86/20 86/21 87/1 87/21 88/15 89/2 89/4 90/20 92/24 93/11 95/20 96/5 96/7 96/14 97/8 97/15 97/21 98/15 100/7 103/16 105/9 105/9 115/10 115/12 118/7 119/22 123/18 136/18 136/18 137/6 142/5 154/22 157/11 157/20 160/10 174/12 178/13 185/25 186/1 187/11 189/19 193/18 200/8 206/23
May 2015 [1] 2/14

May 2021 [2] 4/5 4/9 May/June [1] 89/2 maybe [4] 49/25
64/17 112/20 155/19
McLean [1] 149/24 me [66] 1/25 4/20 23/7 23/10 27/8 28/6 28/16 28/23 32/10 40/1 44/23 45/2 46/6 59/3 59/12 59/19 61/19 69/22 70/15 70/18 71/5 79/24 82/3 88/4 96/14 98/25 99/18 99/21 105/6 106/4 107/23 110/19 113/11 121/3 123/9 124/21 128/14 128/19 129/24 130/3 135/11 137/3 137/5 137/24 138/15 139/15 144/21 150/25 151/3 153/17 156/4 159/3 160/19 168/22 169/21 170/9 170/18 176/8 180/13 189/20 194/15 194/18 197/20 197/22 212/24 216/3
meals [9] 161/16 161/20 187/20 187/25 188/11 189/12 189/21 190/15 190/17
mean [57] 12/12 14/18 17/19 18/25 21/19 24/11 25/18 26/20 27/7 28/9 28/13 29/14 29/20 30/10 30/12 33/14 35/4 44/25 46/11 48/4 48/4 48/13 48/15 48/19 50/22 50/24 60/15 61/20 64/5 67/22 88/9 88/9 90/13 96/10 98/24 99/13 99/18 100/17 101/12 102/23 104/5 127/11 129/25 142/1 142/24 142/25 144/14 146/6 146/6 152/17 152/18 155/6 170/5 190/3 202/7 204/17 205/14 means [8] 70/22 71/9 77/5 86/18 88/14 90/17 112/22 215/12 meant [11] 41/12 43/9 99/8 99/15 126/19 127/6 129/12 150/3 172/6 201/4 206/8
measure [1] 211/23 measures [33] 4/11 14/9 16/3 49/22 54/18 55/1 58/4 63/5 63/9 64/8 65/11 65/17
67/16 72/3 95/14

96/10 96/18 97/7 97/17 97/25 98/7
98/11 103/16 103/20 123/9 124/8 147/9 153/11 175/14 176/10 197/5 197/24 198/17 mechanics [1] 168/11
mechanism [2]
164/23 167/6 mechanisms [3] 11/22 166/19 203/9 media [1] 34/16 medic [1] 61/13 medical [32] 49/21 61/14 108/20 109/3 110/8 110/12 110/15 110/17 111/5 111/23 113/9 114/22 116/7 119/25 120/7 120/14 136/16 149/13 149/15 150/4 152/19 152/23 meritorious [1] 155/12 155/18 155/19 116/17 155/19 155/24 157/4 merits [2] 157/1 157/15 201/15 206/24 172/9 207/5
medicine [1] 101/4 meet [3] 39/18 39/23 44/7
meeting [70] $8 / 15$ 11/18 13/2 13/19 13/22 22/2 22/3 22/11 23/22 26/23 39/9 40/3 40/22 42/19 44/21 53/5 57/21 57/22 62/1 62/2 62/5 62/11 64/22 66/5 66/11 67/2 72/24 73/3 73/14 78/14 81/10 93/13 94/1 94/6 94/12 96/9 96/12 96/13 97/18 106/6 112/9 112/9 112/10 112/15 114/13 119/1 119/12 119/12 119/13 121/12 128/7 138/6 138/8 147/14 148/3 149/21 150/1 150/6 150/9 150/16 150/21 151/4 151/4 153/25 154/7 161/21 161/23 164/2 189/17 191/7 meetings [42] $3 / 12$ 3/15 9/24 11/4 18/16 18/16 22/2 22/9 23/18 microphone [1] 29/1 30/5 39/3 40/16 40/16 40/23 41/24 53/7 54/13 59/14 60/12 62/12 64/16 65/6 65/6 68/11 83/24 119/24 120/11 120/15 121/2 121/6 121/7 121/8 121/11 121/12 129/2 137/5 142/10 148/4 151/24 154/6
message [5] 38/2
38/3 38/20 123/22 124/6
messages [4] 3/10 3/22 5/1 5/9
messaging [6] 76/21 77/1 77/3 77/5 77/14 77/18
met [4] 29/3 39/10
51/15 149/23
method [1] 115/1
metre [22] 28/17
28/17 107/18 107/19
108/1 108/2 108/3 109/7 109/9 109/11 109/16 109/19 109/21 110/10 110/13 110/13 110/23 110/23 111/10 119/4 122/18 122/19
metres [3] 108/14 111/9 119/4
Metzer [4] 200/16 200/19 208/12 217/19
Metzer's [1] 200/17
micro [2] 115/24 144/6
microeconomic [1] 15/10

192/17
mid [4] 67/9 86/19 88/15 147/6
mid-August [1] 147/6
mid-teens [1] 67/9
middle [2] 16/12
99/23
might [38] 4/15 8/3
25/25 29/16 41/14
41/23 42/3 42/6 44/20

44/23 45/1 45/2 45/8 45/13 55/8 56/10 63/8 66/23 68/17 68/18 74/11 75/24 80/20 92/2 93/19 105/11 106/18 126/18 139/20 140/15 147/9 147/20 148/15 148/18 158/2 173/3 179/24 180/1
MIGs [1] 10/13
milk [1] 190/25
million [6] 105/3
127/12 194/21 200/24 200/25 213/18 millions [8] 46/13 85/17 117/4 130/14 130/20 160/23 186/16 197/11
mind [11] 34/24 42/3 48/9 50/11 70/15 78/25 83/5 110/8 116/17 122/16 171/22
minded [1] 43/22
minds [1] 50/4
minimal [4] 85/20
85/22 86/6 159/10
minimising [1] 31/21 minister [196] 1/5 1/9 2/15 2/23 6/4 6/15 6/18 6/21 8/2 8/15 8/21 9/2 9/4 9/4 9/7 9/11 9/13 9/22 10/6 10/17 10/20 10/22 11/1 11/6 11/19 12/6 12/12 12/21 12/25 13/5 13/20 14/17 15/20 18/9 18/14 18/17 18/20 19/3 19/8 20/1 21/16 21/21 22/4 22/6 22/23 23/12 24/8 25/10 25/19 26/18 27/14 27/22 28/3 28/10 29/2 29/8 29/18 30/19 30/20 31/12 31/25 32/1 35/9 36/10 39/1 39/4 39/10 39/11 39/19 39/23 39/24 40/3 40/4 40/14 40/19 41/16 41/20 42/23 43/12 43/18 44/5 44/6 44/21 45/14 46/18 47/8 47/13 47/21 49/1 49/6 49/13 49/18 51/9 51/16 55/10 57/19 62/25 67/15 68/15 68/21 69/3 70/8 70/13 71/23 71/25 72/14 72/18 73/2 73/9 73/11 78/3 79/9 79/12 79/21 80/12 80/25 83/6 85/11 88/24 90/3 91/12 91/19 92/13 93/14 93/18 97/12 102/12 104/11 107/18
(76) mark... - minister
minister... [67]
108/18 108/19 109/2 109/6 110/14 111/20 113/10 114/3 120/17 121/4 122/11 136/16 136/18 136/25 139/16 143/5 146/23 149/22 150/17 151/1 151/9 152/2 152/6 158/7
158/10 158/13 158/17 159/6 159/15 161/16 162/25 166/3 169/9
170/21 171/9 176/20 177/2 177/10 177/14 177/15 178/10 178/15 180/13 180/22 183/6 183/7 187/15 192/16 192/19 193/1 193/3 193/5 193/18 193/19 194/6 196/14 196/16 197/20 198/5 200/17 201/18 203/16 205/13 206/5 208/10 208/15 215/23
Minister Whately [1] 193/5
Minister's [4] 7/17 81/5 91/25 163/8
Ministerial [3] 13/19 43/21 62/4
ministers [20] 4/6
7/22 11/5 29/13 29/15 29/22 30/12 31/4 31/23 34/14 37/6 40/23 41/24 51/14 90/23 164/22 165/24 165/25 184/4 187/7 ministers' [1] 184/3
Ministry [1] 2/16
minorities [2] 82/14 197/14
minority [6] 83/10
116/15 196/18 197/6 198/1 200/1
minute [2] 70/16 157/4
minuted [1] 30/3 minutes [29] 23/23 23/24 54/1 64/16 64/18 64/22 67/5 96/8 97/19 99/8 99/13 106/7 119/1 119/25 120/9 121/5 129/14 132/4 134/22 136/19 142/14 152/21 153/4 153/9 153/17 153/25 154/13 157/3 157/8 misestimated [1] 205/15
misguided [1] 175/8 misinterpreted [1] 143/25
missed [1] 119/19 misunderstanding
[2] 54/4 212/22
Mitchell [5] 176/24 176/25 177/1 187/13 217/11
mitigants [2] 109/18 109/22
mitigation [1] 111/10 mitigations [4]
110/14 111/11 113/1 113/4
mix [2] 89/21 89/22 Mm [1] $44 / 23$
model [9] 19/18 19/21 20/10 78/24 97/9 138/10 138/13 139/10 145/4
modelled [9] 16/7 19/7 96/7 97/7 97/16 99/2 102/3 103/17 115/19
modellers [1] 100/1 modelling [12] 15/5 16/9 54/18 61/2 67/3 67/10 77/19 79/1 80/5 139/23 141/6 143/20 models [2] 15/10 101/13
module [7] 1/12 105/8 105/10 186/25 192/12 216/6 216/17
Module 2 [2] 216/6 216/17
moment [15] 7/24
10/20 12/19 45/3 55/6 58/20 62/18 67/5 95/6 125/9 136/10 149/9 174/5 174/15 201/16 momentous [4] 18/9 48/8 48/15 61/23
moments [6] 23/20
24/2 28/14 69/5 120/1 121/2
Monday [10] 1/1 13/25 41/6 53/6 55/7 57/21 57/21 58/3 62/3 134/19
Mondays [1] 59/12 money [18] 71/1 71/13 127/2 127/21 172/3 173/2 173/13 173/13 173/17 174/10 175/24 176/15 176/19 182/17 182/17 182/25 195/24 210/17
monitoring [3] 13/1 56/5 58/17
month [8] 66/9
119/20 119/21 119/22 120/21 149/18 170/17 175/3
months [4] 14/22
20/6 88/8 211/22

| mooted [1] $72 / 9$ | $110 / 10163 / 24175 / 1$ |
| :--- | :--- | moral [2] 146/8 188/3 192/22 197/13

more [85] 6/17 12/12 MP [1] 2/20
15/8 16/9 19/10 21/6 $\quad \operatorname{Mr}[121] \quad 1 / 31 / 61 / 11$ 25/24 27/6 37/18 37/19 38/11 48/13 54/17 54/17 58/5 58/7 59/22 64/3 65/23 66/16 73/15 77/11 81/12 83/5 89/6 100/2 100/6 116/24 123/10
124/19 131/22 131/23 132/15 132/17 134/2 134/11 134/14 135/3 136/25 137/6 137/6 138/10 139/9 139/23 140/14 140/19 143/20 144/8 145/11 151/3 153/3 153/22 174/21 178/20 181/13 181/19 181/24 182/13 182/17 182/20 182/22 184/9 185/4 186/1 188/24 189/14 190/1 190/5 190/12 190/13 190/16 190/18 192/4 193/7 196/4 202/25 203/25 205/14 206/9 206/11 209/25 209/25 211/15 212/8 214/2
morning [3] 1/4
52/15 177/5
Morris [5] 163/11 163/12 168/25 193/14 217/7
mortality [1] 52/25
most [45] 2/18 11/15
18/8 48/7 49/3 61/23
69/10 73/8 80/16
80/22 82/9 82/12 96/4
119/5 131/23 148/19
156/15 162/11 162/14
162/15 162/18 162/24
171/14 175/8 184/1
185/7 185/9 186/6 186/18 188/17 188/24
190/6 190/8 191/23
191/24 192/2 203/5 205/16 207/20 211/18 171/11 171/23 172/11 213/11 213/15 213/18 175/22
213/25 215/9 Mr Friedman [3]
mothers [1] 190/24
motivated [1] 160/17
192/14 192/15 196/11
Mr Gove [3] 31/25 178/10 178/14

## Mr Hancock [8]

31/25 114/11 127/24 152/9 163/22 164/12 164/20 164/25
5 Mr Jacobs [2] 208/13 215/17
Mr Johnson [3] 4/4 178/9 178/14
Mr Keith [15] 1/3
1/24 6/18 46/7 71/8

75/24 87/11 107/17 131/2 133/17 140/14 144/18 189/16 191/5 216/5
Mr Mark Drakeford's [1] 171/9
Mr Menon [2] 187/14 192/13
Mr Menon's [1] 187/15
Mr Metzer [2] 200/16 208/12
Mr Raab [1] 31/25
Mr Sunak [49] 1/11
2/13 3/3 10/15 22/13 34/9 36/16 44/3 47/19 53/2 74/9 75/14 76/19 90/21 92/13 96/16
97/9 105/11 110/21
113/13 117/17 121/7 123/9 127/23 128/24 132/1 136/11 139/9 145/18 151/14 157/6 163/14 165/5 169/2
173/20 175/21 181/11
187/17 190/20 191/3
192/12 194/5 198/3
200/20 207/7 209/18
210/6 211/22 213/5
Mr Thomas [4]
196/12 196/13 198/3 198/6
Mr Warner [1] 132/8 Mr York-Smith [1] 1/17
Ms [18] 1/18 163/11 163/12 168/25 169/1 169/1 169/2 169/7 176/23 176/24 176/25 177/1 178/25 187/13 193/14 217/7 217/9 217/11
Ms Gowman [3] 169/1 169/2 176/23
Ms Harris [1] 169/1 Ms Josephs [1] 1/18 Ms Mitchell [3]
176/24 176/25 187/13
Ms Morris [3] 163/11
168/25 193/14

## Ms Sturgeon [1]

178/25
much [42] 1/20 15/8
15/21 15/22 30/24
34/21 36/13 38/11
49/2 55/7 58/22 60/20
82/21 83/14 86/2
87/13 90/9 91/13
92/22 108/24 113/3
116/2 123/22 129/4
129/16 134/4 135/3
144/11 162/2 168/22
168/25 176/12 179/1
188/22 191/19 194/11
much... [6] 205/2 205/6 208/9 215/20 215/22 215/23
mulls [1] 47/14
multifaceted [6]
135/10 200/22 203/1 203/25 207/22 208/8
multigenerational [1] 199/25
multilateral [1] 47/22 multiple [3] 3/20 4/24 28/14
must [10] 22/25
72/17 80/21 87/2 92/17 128/2 134/18 139/3 140/22 150/20 my [151] 1/4 3/20 3/24 4/2 4/19 4/23 6/3 6/10 6/11 7/8 8/18 8/21 8/25 9/13 11/9 11/11 11/20 12/8 12/13 12/14 18/24 19/13 19/17 21/13 22/21 23/4 23/8 23/15 23/20 24/2 24/11 24/24 25/2 26/11 27/6 29/17 31/16 32/14 34/13 35/7 35/7 35/14 36/8 40/13 40/18
40/25 41/15 41/19 44/21 48/24 50/2 51/17 51/21 53/16 58/7 59/11 60/10 61/22 62/6 62/18 63/22 65/19 73/16 74/20 75/12 81/4 85/19 88/7 89/11 89/11 89/14 96/11 96/15 100/16 100/17 103/15 105/12 110/23 110/25 111/1 111/1 111/19 112/21 114/4 115/1 117/4 119/18 120/22 122/6 125/4 128/21 129/4 130/22 131/9 142/6 144/2 146/10 156/12 156/24 158/14 158/17 159/18 162/9 163/13 165/4 165/23 166/16 167/1 168/24 168/24 169/8 169/10 169/14 170/21 171/5 175/8 176/20 176/22 178/6 178/23 183/10 183/20 185/6 186/8 186/14 187/12 188/21 194/11 194/16 196/5 196/10 197/23 197/23 198/2 198/7 200/14 201/8 206/15 208/11 208/14 208/17 209/2 209/19 211/18

213/5 213/12 214/1 214/13 215/19 215/21

211/8 213/15 216/19
my Lady [16] 1/4 22/21 62/18 128/21 163/13 168/24 169/8 176/22 196/10 198/7 200/14 208/11 208/14 negotiations [2] 215/19 215/21 216/19 152/15 155/8 myself [1] 51/11 N
name [2] 1/9 123/25 named [1] 50/24 narrative [3] 34/21 81/17 140/16
narrow [1] 6/25
narrower [1] 15/22 nation [1] 61/24 national [19] 123/23 123/25 124/6 138/19 149/17 153/1 153/8 153/11 153/15 154/15 155/14 155/25 157/16 185/15 192/20 211/13 212/10 214/4 214/23 nationally [1] 73/4 nations [4] 125/13 125/14 175/10 177/23 nature [9] 13/15 15/15 37/1 52/23 63/7 74/4 77/10 113/18 172/24
nearly [1] 166/11 necessarily [8] 42/16 42/21 45/11 46/8 90/18 137/7 142/1 142/7
necessary [12] 18/20 20/3 75/9 76/8 98/12 141/3 141/6 141/16 148/16 152/8 159/4 159/12
need [40] 4/6 4/11 10/23 31/9 36/16 45/15 55/22 58/16 66/7 66/8 66/10 66/17 67/13 70/23 71/13 71/15 72/3 75/12 83/13 84/25 86/16 88/12 92/16 106/20 110/11 118/16 127/13 141/17 142/1 156/18 160/7 162/1 176/16 181/7 186/1 186/11 193/3 201/21 201/23 212/21
needed [23] 12/16 19/4 36/4 36/23 55/15 71/1 76/5 98/11 103/7 106/1 106/10 106/10 107/20 140/2 140/17 165/17 172/3 193/8 195/20 206/23 209/9
neighbours [3] 26/22 26/24 28/11
neither [1] 44/16
neutrally [1] 22/24
never [19] 12/3 30/25 41/8 80/23 88/20
110/21 121/10 122/25 134/18 137/24 138/2
142/22 144/12 146/25 148/1 173/6 174/13 191/5 191/11
nevertheless [2]
118/2 126/7
new [10] 54/18 92/5
94/17 105/19 125/23
126/2 140/5 167/10 190/24 191/1
news [1] 58/15
next [10] 14/22 41/2
41/3 79/10 146/17
152/5 185/17 186/2
187/11 213/5
NHS [37] 52/24 53/4
53/9 53/13 53/24 54/7
54/16 55/3 55/6 55/8
55/17 55/18 55/21
55/23 56/1 56/3 56/12
56/21 57/18 57/25
58/2 58/19 60/2 60/8
60/13 60/25 61/4
61/14 62/16 65/5
99/25 100/5 102/10
155/20 165/10 195/19
195/20
Nicola [2] 177/15 181/9
Nicola Sturgeon [2]
177/15 181/9
night [1] 152/4
Nightingales [2]
56/17 57/4
no [112] 3/20 4/14
4/18 11/10 17/22 21/20 25/10 31/4 31/7 33/25 34/3 34/14 34/23 36/16 36/21 39/11 39/16 40/1 40/2 43/19 44/18 46/5 46/10 46/17 46/23 47/6 48/18 55/5 61/7 63/24 67/11 71/23 80/13 87/10 92/3 92/15 93/16 93/23 94/4 97/1 99/21 99/21 100/2 100/6 102/23

104/7 104/7 105/25 106/3 106/6 107/2
108/5 110/15 113/13 115/1 115/1 117/25 118/5 121/8 123/9 125/2 125/25 126/19 128/11 128/18 133/6 134/13 136/3 139/5 139/7 145/3 145/5
147/9 150/11 151/20 155/9 155/15 158/24 159/1 159/1 160/22 161/14 167/5 168/7 168/13 169/1 169/5 169/5 170/5 172/13 175/23 186/12 187/1 191/10 191/14 193/17 194/22 194/24 195/2 195/3 196/9 199/6 201/16 203/13 204/20 204/23 205/8 205/14 210/8 211/10 212/2 212/17
No 10 [1] 31/4 no one [3] 93/16 201/16 212/17
No10 [1] 41/6 nobody [1] 4/9 non [22] 13/6 15/9 39/6 67/20 79/5 85/12 85/15 85/20 85/25 86/19 86/23 87/5 87/8 87/17 87/24 88/1 88/15 88/16 141/2 159/4 159/10 159/19
non-essential [18] 13/6 67/20 85/12 85/15 85/20 85/25 86/19 86/23 87/5 87/8 87/17 87/24 88/1 88/15 88/16 159/4 159/10 159/19
non-pharmaceutical
[2] 39/6 79/5
non-scientific [1] 141/2
non-traditional [1] 15/9
none [6] 7/13 120/15
121/1 124/24 139/2 215/12
nor [6] 3/9 116/7 128/19 138/2 139/18 139/18
normal [18] 21/25
26/2 39/22 42/14 82/5 105/20 107/5 107/6 116/21 123/2 124/7 125/19 142/24 171/3 175/25 190/12 190/13 209/5
normally [2] 174/9 182/14
Northern [5] 172/20

174/6 176/4 176/10 179/8
Northern Ireland [5]
172/20 174/6 176/4 176/10 179/8
nosocomial [2] 94/24
100/23
not [269]
notable [1] 9/5
note [3] 16/21 31/19 91/21
noted [3] 98/6 98/12 164/21
noteworthy [1] 81/8 nothing [8] 22/7 43/23 119/16 148/21
151/11 208/21 212/20 214/25
noting [1] 113/2 notion [1] 211/6 notwithstanding [2] 139/3 179/16
November [7] 114/12
153/9 157/7 157/9
158/8 201/20 202/20
November 2020 [3] 158/8 201/20 202/20 now [59] 3/18 5/11 11/17 19/21 20/20 21/17 35/16 39/24 42/11 47/5 52/6 58/14 58/16 66/10 66/13 67/14 69/2 76/8 85/23 86/18 87/22 88/1 88/14 98/7 105/12 121/21 124/2 125/20 133/10 135/2 140/17 140/22 143/16 146/12 147/2 156/16 156/17 157/2 157/13 157/22 162/12 163/1 165/12 165/20 172/9 174/13 177/19 178/5 188/18 189/18 192/3 193/5 193/14 194/5 195/6 202/9 208/4 214/5 214/21
NPI [4] 39/6 39/11 40/9 79/4
NPIs [10] 37/21 43/19 62/14 78/19 79/7 115/8 115/14 115/22 200/7 207/12
nuance [3] 77/2 134/3 137/3
number [49] 4/16
10/11 14/14 21/18
22/17 22/22 23/1 23/2 23/5 23/7 23/9 34/18 37/3 37/6 41/12 47/20 52/25 55/14 60/4 60/4 61/17 65/6 78/19 93/6
108/11 111/4 115/6
123/1 132/7 132/11

N
number... [19] 138/9
142/9 142/11 146/23
147/22 151/23 160/3
163/18 176/9 187/18
193/6 200/20 201/3
204/8 204/15 206/4
207/9 209/14 210/22
Number 10 [20] 4/16 22/22 23/2 23/5 23/7 23/9 34/18 37/3 37/6 41/12 47/20 111/4 115/6 123/1 132/7 132/11 142/9 142/11 160/3 209/14
Number 11 [1] 23/1 numbers [6] 99/15 117/21 123/11 129/21 176/8 203/19
nurseries [1] 86/8
nurses [1] 61/18
0
objective [3] 33/2
102/8 117/1
objectives [2] 156/15 186/16
obligated [2] 79/20 104/20
obliged [1] 187/12
OBR [7] 16/10 93/1
140/7 143/17 201/20 202/2 203/4
observation [3] 4/20 12/8 19/5
obvious [23] 32/10
36/11 36/20 37/7 37/10 83/7 110/4 112/16 115/2 116/11 116/16 117/22 122/22 128/24 132/7 132/8 142/8 148/8 149/1 149/2 151/23 161/6 161/11
obviously [70] $3 / 25$
5/15 6/7 7/8 9/23 11/1 13/7 15/3 20/20 21/17 23/6 24/25 25/18 25/20 26/12 29/9 29/19 29/25 44/17 50/7 50/19 53/5 53/18 55/1 60/1 61/4 69/13 74/3 74/24 74/25 78/16 79/24 84/4 89/11 95/3 98/17 101/1 103/13 112/4 112/11 117/23 131/4 134/10 134/12 138/13 138/17 147/15 149/2 154/24 157/13 160/4 163/7 165/12 170/6 172/21 177/9 178/5 180/23 182/24 184/23

185/3 186/12 186/21 186/25 188/16 189/9 194/17 195/11 195/22 207/24
occasion [2] 3/11 182/20
occasions [1] 171/20 occupancy [2]
112/16 118/11
occupant [1] 23/1 occupy [1] 63/13 occur [1] 203/2 occurred [1] 110/24 October [33] 2/24 38/18 43/11 48/3 147/3 149/16 149/16 152/2 152/11 152/14 152/24 153/18 153/24 153/25 154/6 154/7 154/11 154/13 155/13 155/23 157/2 157/4 157/6 157/11 157/16 172/1 173/10 173/20 174/1 175/3 175/25 179/12 180/15 October 2020 [1] 175/3
odd [1] 150/25
OECD [1] 143/22 off [25] 19/22 21/17 31/7 31/19 32/2 34/3 35/2 36/17 37/1 46/25 47/7 61/16 63/22 82/13 84/5 99/16 115/9 133/5 146/4 162/20 197/13 200/8 200/12 206/12 207/14 off,' [1] 31/3
offer [1] 8/23
office [30] 3/24 4/19 5/3 12/25 13/5 17/11 17/20 20/13 20/16 22/22 23/5 23/7 23/9 43/22 78/13 79/15 79/17 80/2 80/10 80/14 80/20 81/3 90/6 123/23 138/18 139/18 142/11 145/12 145/22 146/10
Officer [23] 49/21 61/14 108/20 109/3 110/9 110/12 110/15 111/5 111/23 114/22 119/25 120/7 120/14 136/16 149/15 150/4 152/24 155/12 155/19 155/24 157/4 157/15 201/15
Officer's [1] 110/17 official [3] 95/9 132/9 138/3
officially [1] $4 / 2$
officials [15] 4/5 4/8
4/15 4/16 13/4 29/2

29/3 30/3 80/17 81/1 132/7 137/21 152/5 160/2 168/9
offs [1] 146/6
often [9] 10/1 38/2
47/19 76/14 83/24
129/14 130/3 146/8 193/13
oh [4] 16/24 31/7 34/3 59/23
okay [6] 59/23
107/24 114/1 132/2
133/19 168/5
old [1] 127/17
older [1] 90/19
on [431]
once [10] 16/1 44/21
71/3 71/17 82/2 82/22
93/25 122/14 153/6 153/8
one [84] $4 / 26 / 19$
8/16 11/24 11/25
13/14 18/22 20/9 20/11 28/15 41/9 50/3 58/7 61/23 63/21 64/16 66/8 73/7 87/13 87/18 93/16 95/21 95/23 100/19 103/16 103/19 104/8 108/10 113/15 115/16 117/3 118/11 123/13 126/16 126/16 127/23 128/13 operational [3] 45/24 128/17 131/15 133/11 $47 / 5$ 196/5 133/23 135/10 136/1 operationally [1] 138/8 139/23 144/15 $46 / 3$
145/20 146/17 150/19 operations [1] 19/15 154/20 156/9 158/3 opinion [3] 8/22 160/23 161/15 163/16 10/20 151/2 163/24 165/13 166/4 167/7 168/15 175/8 176/10 182/20 187/6 189/10 190/6 193/7 197/3 197/8 201/16 201/19 203/9 203/14 204/1 204/15 204/21 206/24 207/2 207/23 209/5 209/20 210/20 212/17 216/7
one's [1] 93/19 one-way [2] 115/16 118/11
ones [4] $2 / 236 / 9$ 63/19 166/14
ongoing [1] 208/4
online [1] 92/5
only [24] 3/13 7/20
7/21 9/16 9/18 22/20
43/24 47/7 51/11
65/23 76/6 76/25
80/22 86/8 90/1 90/4
105/7 115/12 136/1
147/20 153/22 175/17
213/13 214/25
only' [1] 39/7
onus [1] 121/20 onwards [1] 16/18 open [28] 38/11 44/11 71/14 77/5 82/2 86/16 86/18 86/23 87/22 88/1 88/12 88/14 89/20 90/14 92/8 95/1 108/11 108/12 116/8 122/1 122/20 135/25 136/8 156/9 164/23 200/10 206/13 207/14
opened [10] 82/23
85/3 85/24 87/8 90/1 90/22 115/10 118/7 118/7 118/8
opening [17] 13/6 28/18 87/4 91/3 94/6 94/8 95/14 112/19 115/18 118/19 119/6 121/1 121/20 122/6 126/13 199/9 199/10
openings [1] 118/6 operate [1] 115/21
operated [4] 115/13
182/13 200/11 209/4
operating [6] 48/24
71/21 82/2 96/24
140/8 199/14
operation [2] 70/21
209/3
originally [1] 49/9
Os [3] 11/3 21/14 30/4
other [88] 5/5 5/9 9/9 12/14 14/14 15/10 16/15 16/20 21/10 21/10 23/8 25/24 26/5 26/22 27/9 29/4 31/21 32/19 32/19 33/8 33/9 33/17 35/22 35/24 36/2 36/6 37/22 37/22 38/12 39/11 40/23 51/14 57/5 57/16 66/19 69/20 72/19 77/11 79/22 80/15 81/2 81/12 84/10 84/17 84/20 90/23 91/2 91/7 92/3 98/13 98/15 99/5 108/6 108/13 115/14 116/3 117/12 121/11 125/7 125/13 125/14 125/16 125/24 126/3 134/7 135/4 135/7 136/6 137/17 140/9 141/1 141/11 141/13 143/7 144/4 144/23 157/3 163/8 167/14 188/8 192/23 194/25 196/1 197/7 210/3 212/14 212/19 215/1
others [13] 4/6 28/18 53/5 75/14 122/8
others... [8] 122/11 139/7 140/8 148/2 201/15 203/5 209/14 211/20
otherwise [4] 103/1
126/24 172/10 195/10 ought [2] 12/17 83/14 our [37] 2/19 11/25 26/9 31/8 34/4 43/14 50/4 58/23 63/22 65/3 69/9 69/12 69/16 78/4 81/23 82/25 87/1 87/2 92/3 106/8 109/1 116/19 122/23 127/25 144/18 152/18 162/13 162/20 170/14 182/10 185/23 188/19 188/21 191/22 191/25 192/1 206/17
ourselves [2] 71/13 152/13
out [100] 3/7 12/22
13/18 14/7 21/21
23/14 28/23 39/15
41/22 47/14 47/24
54/18 54/25 57/14
58/1 64/13 67/3 67/11
74/5 74/12 74/18
75/21 76/4 77/23
78/10 79/13 84/3
89/23 92/5 93/5 95/10
95/22 98/4 98/21
98/21 111/11 114/14
114/14 114/17 114/17
114/24 114/24 115/7
115/7 115/12 115/12
115/21 115/21 119/11 119/11 119/16 119/16 119/21 119/21 120/2 120/2 120/12 120/12 121/10 121/10 122/15 122/15 123/10 123/10 126/1 126/1 126/9 126/10 126/12 126/12 129/14 133/17 137/2 144/7 147/21 151/10 157/13 164/6 169/14 169/14 169/18 170/2 171/12 171/13 189/9 189/25 197/3 197/3 198/6 199/2 199/2
199/22 199/22 200/6 200/6 207/2 207/21
211/4 211/10 215/16
outbreak [1] 153/1
outbreaks [1] 153/4
outcome [3] 8/6 61/5
64/19
outcomes [3] 131/5 133/5 196/25
outdoors [1] 77/10
outline [1] 43/16
outlined [1] 120/22 outlook [1] 201/20 outs [1] 39/16 outside [6] 26/22 115/6 123/1 130/15 130/21 150/22
outsize [1] 69/12 over [63] 2/6 3/20 10/9 12/8 14/12 14/22 15/16 16/10 19/19 21/9 25/1 25/21 25/23 37/17 38/5 41/22 42/4 42/8 42/9 42/22 43/20 44/2 47/14 48/1 48/5 52/12 58/14 59/3 61/7 61/21 61/21 67/1 71/22 75/4 75/6 76/2 82/5 100/17 107/1 124/16 129/2 131/6 131/13 133/11 134/1 135/1 135/3 136/14 140/2 143/15 145/13 145/17 148/13 159/7 176/25 186/5 187/15 188/10 196/13 200/17 203/13 205/23 211/19
overall [14] 24/20 34/21 53/16 64/10 77/3 92/10 115/17 116/1 124/1 159/17 185/23 188/21 188/21 199/10
overarching [3] 75/22 106/21 106/24 overcompliance [1] 76/20
overdone [1] 92/2 overdraft [2] 71/10 71/14
overestimating [2] 94/22 99/9 overreaction [1] 150/14
overtopped [1] 53/11 overwhelm [1] 54/7
overwhelmed [9]
53/11 53/24 54/17
55/3 55/15 56/24
60/20 65/5 102/10
own [17] 12/13 13/7
91/9 93/20 114/6
121/7 128/6 133/5
143/17 150/4 154/25
156/25 172/16 174/17
182/16 204/22 214/19
P
pace [3] 82/4 105/17 107/6
pack [2] 23/25 168/2 package [18] 13/24
50/16 95/13 96/9 97/7
97/9 97/11 97/25 98/9
98/12 100/10 101/17

101/25 102/19 116/1 panel's [1] 112/23 119/5 164/9 168/17 panned [1] 89/23 package A [1] 50/16 packages [1] 190/7 page [35] 12/23 13/9 13/9 14/1 14/6 27/17 30/15 30/17 34/8 34/8 38/23 41/2 43/3 43/5 43/20 74/6 79/3 83/20 83/22 86/13 86/14 86/25 88/10 88/11 91/24 92/8 93/15 99/23 130/18 171/10 177/16 177/18 180/3 201/22 217/2
page 1 [3] 38/23 43/3 177/16
page 116 [1] 201/22
page 2 [5] 41/2 86/14
86/25 93/15 177/18
page 22 [1] 13/9
page 23 [1] 12/23
page 26 [2] 83/20 83/22
page 3 [3] 30/15
30/17 34/8
page 4 [1] 79/3
page 40 [1] 171/10
page 5 [1] 14/6
page 53 [1] 74/6
page 6 [1] 130/18
page 8 [1] 27/17
page up [1] 88/10
pages [7] 14/12
17/13 118/13 118/15 122/2 198/10 198/11 pages 5 [1] 17/13 pages to [1] 14/12 paid [4] 116/14 197/12 199/3 199/16 pandemic [53] 2/3 2/4 2/23 5/23 6/11 8/17 15/3 15/14 38/21 40/8 74/7 76/5 76/13 83/12 128/25 130/25 131/6 145/3 145/4 145/7 162/10 165/8 165/19 171/6 171/21 172/24 175/9 176/2 177/7 178/17 183/6 184/6 184/11 185/13 185/14 185/17 186/5 188/11 188/18 188/22 189/11 189/25 190/12 190/15 190/19 191/18 191/20 196/25 201/25 202/8 203/7 210/3 214/5
panel [16] 108/20 109/3 110/9 110/11 110/15 110/16 111/2 111/3 111/21 112/3 112/5 113/6 113/8 113/13 113/25 114/7
paper [11] 13/3 17/11
27/15 27/23 28/4 47/1 78/12 79/6 79/11 125/24 146/21
papers [5] 13/10 14/2
65/25 73/7 83/23
paperwork [1]
158/21
paragraph [16] 13/8
13/9 84/3 84/12 86/25 87/1 112/21 112/25
113/5 164/13 164/19 171/23 175/2 175/4 193/10 201/19
paragraph 136 [1] 171/23
paragraph 138 [1] 175/2
paragraph 139 [1] 175/4
paragraph 17 [2]
86/25 87/1
paragraph 229 [1] 193/10
paragraph 257 [1]
112/21
paragraph 491 [1] 164/13
paragraph 72 [1] 13/9
paragraph 75 [1] 13/8
paragraph 82 [1] 84/3
paragraph 83 [1]
84/12
paragraphs [5] 74/6
74/12 171/7 181/10 193/24
paragraphs 102 [1] 181/10
paragraphs 182 [1] 74/6
paragraphs 236 [1] 193/24
parallel [3] 137/13
137/16 141/1
parameters [1]
154/25
parents [3] 89/16
90/17 191/16
parlance [1] 71/10
Parliament [1] 2/14
part [43] 5/6 8/9 9/8 11/15 11/20 23/24 25/14 25/14 37/11
38/20 40/24 40/25
51/17 55/20 79/22 81/4 82/14 83/8 83/11 115/25 116/18 117/1

89/21 89/22 112/7 Patrick Vallance [3] 114/16 115/10 115/12 38/16 95/13 124/11

118/7 123/18 127/7 137/22 142/10 152/8 159/5 176/4 184/11
193/11 197/13 200/8 204/7 216/7 216/8
part-time [4] 82/14 83/8 193/11 197/13
participants [2]
216/10 216/13
participants' [1] 163/9
participate [3] 12/16 23/14 170/19
participated [3] 11/8 19/10 201/10
participating [2] 8/16 85/10
particular [45] 7/8
8/5 8/9 13/2 14/8
14/14 28/22 36/8
39/20 43/6 45/3 56/19
57/4 61/12 62/11 66/1
76/17 89/11 91/10
94/6 94/12 95/14
97/12 112/10 134/17 135/25 153/3 165/8
165/20 169/12 171/7
174/15 178/15 178/20
179/19 179/22 180/12
181/14 191/21 195/20
201/13 206/15 207/17 212/5 216/1
particularly [41] 9/15
13/10 15/10 17/25
20/8 20/16 22/15
25/19 36/5 37/14
37/19 40/21 42/14
44/25 45/4 48/2 49/11
58/8 63/24 77/16
82/16 85/17 85/24
86/7 86/22 87/10 89/5
117/5 140/18 141/3
146/13 148/1 150/20
161/15 162/21 163/9
199/25 201/12 204/12
208/2 209/8
partnered [1] 123/25
partners [3] 168/7
168/12 196/4
parts [1] 185/21
party [3] 2/25 3/13 112/14
pass [1] 174/11
passed [1] 61/25
passionate [1] 46/20
past [3] 2/6 $3 / 2167 / 6$
pathway [1] 163/24
Patrick [9] 38/16
45/23 95/13 124/11
130/7 138/17 161/21
161/22 196/23

Patrick's [1] 210/22

| P | 199/11 |  |  | 43 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| pattern [1] 1 |  |  |  |  |
| [1] |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  | plausible [3] 30/13 |  |
|  | Perelman [3] 38/25 | picture [4] 68/19 | 204/7 204/24 | 42/8 75/25 88/24 98/8 |
| 76/6 76/17 81/23 | 43/4 93/10 | 155/16 156/1 157/ | play [1] 87/7 | 10 |
|  | perfect [6] | piece [3] 46/25 48/16 | played [1] 3 | 11 |
|  |  |  | playing [1] | /9 |
|  | 214/25 215/12 | pikestaff | please [23] 1/8 | 116/11 |
| 94/ | performance | pillar [2] 169/4 | 12/23 18/10 38/23 | 118/22 120/19 120/23 |
|  |  | 208 | 43/20 44/3 76/16 78/ | 122/5 122/21 123/3 |
|  | perhaps [26] | pillars [1] | 79/3 107/23 108/24 | 124/16 125/15 126/21 |
| 184/10 185/2 211/ | 15/17 28/16 36/23 | pilot [2] 211/11 213/4 | 115/1 127/23 147/2 | 130/13 130/19 132/17 |
|  | 37/3 41/11 47/21 | place [61] 4/11 10/11 | 159/24 162/5 163/2 | 133/5 133/8 134/17 |
|  | 74/10 77/1 77/8 79/19 | 18/21 20/18 28/15 | 177/13 191/4 197 | 149/18 156/8 166/9 |
| peers [1] 69/12 | 86/14 90/22 93/2 | 50/2 50/14 50/19 | 198/4 206/6 | 170/7 170/8 194/14 |
|  | 93/19 95/ | 57/22 62/7 62/8 68/14 | plenty [1] | 195/11 195/13 196/2 |
|  | 112 | 70/5 81/8 101/25 | plot | 201/6 202/9 204/12 |
|  | 144/8 147/17 148/1 | 102/19 104/22 105/19 | plural [1] 63/5 | 210/1 211/19 211/20 |
| 11/24 21/3 21/15 | 148/12 152/4 196 | 106/17 109/18 109/23 | plus [5] 109/7 109/9 | 212/14 |
| 21/18 23/4 23/18 | pe | 114/9 115/14 115/1 | 110/10 110/13 133/19 | po |
| 23/19 27/25 32/25 | period [34] | 121/17 123/22 129/22 | pm [14] | 7/6 35/21 35/24 38/13 |
| 33/18 34/16 38/1 | 12/13 22/15 23/10 | 140/24 146/11 152/15 | 57/21 62/1 62/2 62/22 | 98/14 102/7 134/10 |
| 42/10 42/19 46/ | 23/15 23/16 24/3 | 155/6 162/10 162/22 | 79/14 91/23 107/14 | 135/6 136/1 149 |
| 46/19 47/14 52/1 59 | 24/12 24/24 25/18 | 165/12 167/22 167/23 | 107/16 163/4 163 | 204/21 |
| 60/17 60/18 61/9 | 25/23 38/7 48/2 49/3 | 168/16 170/4 177/25 | 196/21 216/20 | political [1] 188/3 |
| 61/17 70/25 75/24 | 49/4 50/2 52/7 53/17 | 179/5 179/21 183 | point [82] 7/7 11/10 | politicised [1] 161/8 |
| 77/6 77/20 77/21 | 11 58/8 65/19 | 183/17 185/16 185/20 | 11/12 16/5 16/18 24/6 | [ $81 / 11$ |
| 77/23 81 | 139/16 141/10 143/14 | 186/16 187/10 188/2 | 25/19 26/3 29/10 | 82/16 82/17 82/18 |
| 82/4 82/12 82/ | 148/14 160/20 166/25 | 188 | 32/14 32/18 32/20 | 117/7 |
| 82/21 85/18 89/4 89/5 | 173/10 190/9 200/25 | 190/16 192/2 192/6 | 33/20 33/23 37/16 |  |
| 93/6 99/2 106/1 | 205/17 211/25 213/6 | 200/10 207/2 208/6 | 46/7 54/24 59/4 64/17 | poorer [4] 187/20 |
| 116/13 116/24 116/24 | periods [3] 50/23 | 209/6 213/11 213/13 | 64/25 69/17 77/16 | 187/25 189/21 191/ |
| 116/25 117/5 117/10 | /15 206/2 | 213/23 | 84/20 86/15 | poorest[1] 162/17 |
| 117/15 118/25 119/19 | permanent [8] 111/3 | placed [3] 1 | 88/25 89/14 92/1 | popped [1] 87/18 |
| 119/22 121/3 121/20 | 127/3 130/10 188/12 | 180/5 215 | 92/21 94/18 95/23 | population [1] 65/16 |
| 123/10 123/17 124/8 | 6 | placem | 5 | ed [1] 137/12 |
| 124/19 127/12 127/13 | 191/2 | 192/23 | 108/13 111/19 112/1 | posited: [1] 138/9 |
| 127/16 127/20 127/21 | permanent secretary | pla | 112/24 113/15 114/2 | posited: an [1] 138/9 |
| 129/9 132/5 133/18 | [2] 111/3 130/10 |  | 114/5 118/5 119/18 | 52] $5 / 24$ |
| 134/4 135/13 139/20 | permissibly [1] 7 | placing [3] | 120/21 123/16 127/ | 5/25 8/9 14/6 19/1 |
| 140/4 142/5 142/6 | permission [1] | 90/24 199/3 | 129/4 129/25 131/9 | 33/15 33/19 35/1 35 |
| 46/13 148/19 |  | plain [14] | 131/15 132/1 132/16 | /1 |
| 151/6 151/7 151/8 | perpetual | /19 83/10 | 135/3 135/20 | 50/14 50/18 |
| 156/16 | person [7] 32/7 | 108/3 109/13 112/ | 139/5 141/18 144/2 | 55/4 56/2 56/19 60/6 |
| 158/3 160/14 160/16 | 41/19 45/21 129/10 | 114/7 125/21 136/1 | 45/1 146/10 | 60/7 60/8 77/2 78/16 |
| 160/19 161/24 162/19 | 150/8 16 | 147/4 153/20 154/7 | 152/25 153/13 154/19 | 80/17 83/17 83/19 |
|  | personal [2] 210/23 | plainly [3] 79 | 155/11 155/20 159/2 | 85/4 85/8 87/6 87/15 |
| 181/16 | 211/3 | 104/15 162/4 | 159/9 159/11 159/18 | 100/7 101/14 104/14 |
| 181/19 185/2 191/6 | personality [1] | plan [28] 39/10 | 166/21 168/6 168/16 | 105/5 110/17 122/24 |
|  | personally [4] 42/5 | 77/17 78/9 84/15 | 180/17 180/19 183/10 | 133/3 147/21 148/23 |
|  | 140/18 189/21 210/5 | 84/19 87/2 92/11 | 183/12 189/23 195/5 | 150/2 150/11 153/23 |
| 197/13 197/19 199/12 | persons [1] 207/9 | 95/20 96/5 98/25 | 212/8 214/1 | 156/8 156/13 156/24 |
|  | perspective [7] | 103/16 103/19 106/6 | pointed [4] 25/4 | 157/6 158/18 161/13 |
| 205/16 208/7 209/17 | 71/19 81/21 90/4 90/7 | 114/11 114/16 114/20 | 133/17 137/2 213/24 | 175/19 193/18 210/23 |
| 210/9 210/25 211/7 | 90/12 104/13 186/14 |  |  | 211/9 |
| 211/12 212/16 212/19 | persuaded [3] | 116/18 120/1 | 23/22 28/22 41/23 | positions [2] 91/10 |
| 3/15 214/13 215/10 | 140/18 141/3 1 | 123/18 164/16 199/10 | 42/23 43/25 46/20 | 19 |
| people's [12] 36/3 |  |  |  |  |
| 60/21 75/8 81/22 82/7 | pharmaceutica |  |  | 6/5 |
| 82/24 159/13 160/24 | 39/6 79/5 | planning [6] 119/14 <br> 120/6 122/14 185/14 | $\begin{aligned} & 142 / 5171 / 1 \\ & 178 / 17 \end{aligned}$ | ossible [13] $6 / 5$ |
| 185/5 186/17 192/20 | phase [1] 20/7 <br> phone [4] 3/8 3/20 | 120/6 122/14 185/14 199/22 206/7 | points......with [1] | 44/20 44/22 83/14 83/15 85/2 109/19 |

(81) pattern - possible
possible... [6] 113/4
126/11 144/7 153/5 160/23 177/22
possibly [1] 161/13
post [1] 188/18
post-pandemic [1]
188/18
potential [8] 31/12 67/24 95/16 98/1 98/10 112/15 199/24 207/16
potentially [3] 22/1 100/25 202/17
pound [1] 213/13
pounds [3] 165/15 188/10 209/7
poverty [2] 162/15 190/9
powers [5] 172/16
173/15 173/15 174/18 174/22
Powis [1] 156/3
PPE [10] 104/10
104/12 104/15 104/20 104/25 106/1 106/6
106/10 106/20 107/3
PPS [1] 120/16
practical [4] 26/23
30/13 198/19 215/4
practice [2] 122/2
123/4
pre [1] 145/4
pre-existing [1]
145/4
precise [11] 16/8 61/10 69/2 113/3 121/6 143/10 144/17 203/21 205/4 206/14 207/15
precisely [18] 44/19
56/22 57/6 58/21 62/10 63/17 102/2
119/23 132/9 167/13
172/25 173/4 175/24
183/11 183/16 191/20
197/10 203/22
precision [1] 16/7
predicated [2] 22/14 77/19
predicted [3] 56/13
74/22 125/4
predominant [3]
25/14 205/16 205/19
predominantly [2]
26/12 168/3
preface [1] 1/23
prefer [1] 194/8 preference [1] 43/23 prepared [3] 2/8 98/11 125/24
preparing [1] 145/8
present [3] 20/2

65/13 112/14 presentation [1] 17/19
presented [12] 53/16 56/21 57/7 61/1 84/14 114/10 131/17 131/20 131/22 132/20 137/7
148/5
presenting [1] 63/20 preserve [1] 116/13 press [12] 38/6 38/9 38/11 38/17 54/13 68/10 98/6 149/4 149/16 155/13 155/20 156/3
pressed [1] 181/12 presumably [4] 10/6 25/13 56/23 150/3
pretend [1] 146/22
pretty [6] 30/24 49/2
61/5 87/13 93/4 144/11
prevailant [1] 203/5
prevalence [7] 92/16 100/9 101/20 103/11 204/13 205/11 206/8 prevent [3] 53/23 192/22 199/20
prevented [1] 156/18 prevention [1] 167/4 previous [13] 22/6 32/8 36/1 39/24 41/20 58/5 65/3 72/14 103/23 116/25 138/23 194/12 213/12
previously [15] 4/25 32/15 37/13 45/6 54/20 80/23 87/10 87/18 92/21 116/24 118/20 180/20 188/20 200/12 207/18
price [1] 69/15 primacy [1] 24/13 primarily [5] 3/24 8/25 107/4 125/24 165/22
primary [11] 6/10 8/18 31/16 90/15 117/4 117/15 126/19 167/2 167/19 212/25 215/5
Prime [190] 1/5 1/9 2/23 6/4 6/15 6/21 7/17 8/2 8/15 8/21 9/2 9/4 9/4 9/7 9/11 9/13 9/22 10/6 10/17 10/20 10/22 11/1 11/6 11/19 12/6 12/12 12/21 12/25 13/5 13/19 13/20 14/17 15/20 18/9 18/14 18/17 18/20 19/3 19/8 20/1 21/16 21/21 22/4 22/6 22/23 23/12 24/8

## 25/10 25/19 26/18

 27/14 27/22 28/3 28/10 29/2 29/8 29/18 30/19 30/20 31/12 31/25 32/1 35/9 36/10 39/1 39/4 39/10 39/19 39/23 39/24 40/3 40/4 40/14 40/19 41/16 41/20 42/23 43/12 43/18 43/21 44/5 44/6 44/21 45/14 46/18 47/8 47/13 47/21 49/1 49/6 49/13 49/18 51/9 51/16 55/10 57/19 62/4 62/25 67/15 68/15 68/21 69/3 70/8 70/13 71/23 71/25 72/14 72/17 73/2 73/9 73/11 78/3 79/9 79/11 79/21 80/12 80/25 81/5 83/6 85/11 88/24 90/3 91/12 91/19 91/25 92/13 93/14 93/18 97/12 102/12 104/11 107/18 108/18 108/19 109/2 109/6 110/14 111/20 113/10 114/3 120/17 121/4 122/11 136/16 136/18 136/25 139/16 143/5 146/23 149/22 150/17 151/1 151/9 152/2 152/6 158/7 158/10 158/13 158/17 159/6 159/14 161/16 162/25 163/8 169/9 170/21 176/20 177/2 177/15 180/13 180/22 183/7 187/15 192/16 192/19 193/3 193/18 194/6 196/14 196/16 197/20 198/5 200/17 201/18 203/16 205/13 206/5 208/10 208/15 215/23 Prime Minister [174] 1/5 1/9 2/23 6/4 6/15 6/21 8/2 8/15 9/2 9/4 9/4 9/7 9/11 9/13 9/22 10/6 10/17 10/20 10/22 11/1 11/6 11/19 private [15] 3/24 5/3 12/6 12/12 12/21 12/25 13/5 13/20 14/17 15/20 18/9 18/14 18/17 18/20 19/3 19/8 20/1 21/16 21/21 22/4 22/6 22/23 23/12 24/8 25/10 25/19 26/18 27/14 27/22 28/3 28/10 29/2 29/8 29/18 30/19 30/20 31/12 31/25 32/1 35/9 36/10 39/1 39/4 39/10 39/19 39/23 39/24 40/340/14 40/19 41/16 41/20 42/23 43/12 43/18 44/5 44/6 44/21 45/14 46/18 47/8 47/13 47/21 49/1 49/6 49/13 49/18 51/9 51/16 55/10 57/19 62/25 67/15 68/15 68/21 69/3 70/8 70/13 71/23 71/25 72/14 73/2 73/9 73/11 78/3 79/9 79/21 80/25 83/6 85/11 88/24 90/3 91/12 91/19 92/13 93/14 93/18 97/12 102/12 104/11 107/18 108/18 108/19 109/2 109/6 110/14 111/20 113/10 114/3 120/17 121/4 122/11 136/16 136/18 136/25 139/16 143/5 146/23 149/22 150/17 151/1 151/9 152/2 152/6 158/7 158/10 158/13 158/17 159/6 161/16 162/25 169/9 170/21 176/20 177/2 177/15 180/13 180/22 183/7 187/15 192/16 192/19 193/3 193/18 194/6 196/14 196/16 198/5 201/18 203/16 205/13 206/5 208/10 215/23
Prime Minister's [4] 7/17 81/5 91/25 163/8 Prime Ministerial [2] 43/21 62/4
primer [1] 174/23
principal [10] 38/24
39/8 41/4 78/6 86/12
87/21 91/21 98/4 102/17 109/14
principally [1] 140/7 principle [1] 154/19 prior [3] 166/25 185/12 185/13 prioritised [1] 195/25 priority [1] 72/24 54/12 54/12 78/6 86/12 87/21 91/21 98/4 102/17 109/14 private office [2] 3/24 5/3
private' [1] 27/16
private,' [1] 27/24
privately [2] 45/19
46/2
privy [1] 113/25
pro [1] 160/3
probably [30] 4/21
8/13 12/12 21/19

23/17 23/22 29/10 34/18 38/21 50/25 61/19 61/20 63/17 69/17 72/14 90/2 91/13 92/20 93/15 94/21 99/7 105/6 131/13 132/19 133/14 136/23 143/19 172/4 201/15 204/16
problem [9] 47/12 69/1 69/19 70/7 70/7 184/18 193/5 194/10 204/1
problems [1] 127/25 problems' [1] 28/1 procedures [1] 25/9 proceed [1] 166/10 process [47] 9/25 10/8 10/9 11/12 11/17 13/4 19/9 21/24 22/5 41/16 41/17 41/25 42/2 42/9 42/18 42/22 43/1 45/9 47/12 62/23 68/2 72/7 78/13 79/15
79/17 80/2 80/10
80/13 80/14 96/2 100/20 104/22 106/5
106/12 106/16 108/22
135/10 136/14 143/5
151/6 152/8 158/2
158/4 165/5 195/15 210/16 216/7
processes [5] 18/14 42/5 45/7 107/5 187/3
processing [1] 213/8
procured [1] 15/9
procuring [1] 107/3
produce [3] 65/25
110/5 212/17
produced [5] 17/11
17/18 17/20 31/22 146/21
produces [2] 34/18 34/19
products [1] 13/1
profession [1] 193/9
professional [1] 131/8
Professor [14] 35/23
95/11 95/12 119/2
124/11 124/11 124/12
148/9 149/24 149/25
150/10 150/10 196/15
217/17
Professor Chris
Whitty [1] 124/11
Professor Edmunds
[1] 35/23
Professor Gupta [1] 149/24
Professor Gupta's
[1] 150/10
Professor Heneghan
[2] 149/25 150/10

Professor Sir [6]
95/11 95/12 119/2
124/11 124/12 148/9
professors [2] 101/4 149/24
Professors Edmunds [1] 149/24
profitably [1] 108/12
programme [5]
188/14 189/12 189/15
189/24 190/22
progress [4] 10/13 124/3 204/3 214/4 progressed [1] 15/14 progression [1] 58/17
prohibit [1] 164/4
projected [1] 56/25
prolific [2] 3/23 5/2
promote [3] 8/5 8/9 116/21
promoted [1] 7/25
promoting [1] 160/7
promulgation [1] 128/8
prone [2] 67/25
133/23
pronouncement [1] 195/13
proof [2] 153/7
211/17
proper [3] 27/4 51/8 212/8
properly [8] 36/22 37/1 37/2 51/8 100/24 106/15 160/6 198/20
proposal [9] 43/10 43/22 86/21 138/2 147/15 166/8 167/11 194/8 196/2
proposals [4] 164/5 164/8 166/18 193/6
propose [1] 79/10 proposed [7] 96/19
100/14 102/20 164/15 164/25 192/21 194/3
proposition [6] 53/4 74/11 105/12 126/5 147/12 192/6

## propositions [3]

44/15 163/18 210/15
prospect [1] 119/6
protect [2] 197/18 199/11
protected [3] 162/18 186/16 198/17
protecting [3] 62/16 117/4 193/9
proud [1] 186/20
provide [16] 6/15 9/1
9/21 14/24 19/2 40/13
40/19 73/16 134/24

165/14 172/3 178/3 179/7 182/14 188/15 195/19
provided [18] 1/11 9/6 10/19 13/10 14/16 17/14 25/5 28/21 31/23 76/12 95/10 142/8 171/17 172/8 173/17 195/21 210/13 214/9
providers [1] 167/13 provides [1] 171/14 providing [5] 1/20 8/11 135/11 186/3 214/10
provision [4] 1/14 3/5 188/13 190/17 provisions [1] 185/15
psychology [1] 151/8 public [54] 5/17 6/14 6/24 24/13 27/15 27/23 30/8 30/24 34/21 36/14 37/17 38/3 52/17 52/22 54/13 57/23 74/3 75/20 75/25 76/23 81/23 93/4 101/8 101/16 102/21 121/14 122/13 122/21 135/1 135/18 140/16 143/9 143/12 144/4 144/12 148/25 155/24 160/5 160/18 161/9 161/10 161/10 171/5 175/7 175/18 175/19 178/2 179/24 179/25 188/3 195/16 198/14 198/23 206/18
public's [2] 34/24 136/5
public-facing [1]
34/21
publications [1] 13/7
publish [1] 142/18
published [13] 16/12
64/1 93/2 110/9
114/10 142/15 142/22
143/11 143/18 144/6
144/8 162/16 198/23
pubs [1] 43/23
pure [1] 7/5
purely [2] 90/7
159/19
purported [1] 210/10 purpose [2] 89/8 127/19
purposefully [1] 84/9 purposes [6] 1/12 2/19 40/2 129/22 154/22 181/8
pursue [1] 137/23 pursued [1] 147/19 push [2] 64/12 96/10
pushed [2] 85/3 210/25
put [59] 4/11 10/5 10/11 12/20 13/25 20/18 22/24 24/9 35/6 46/25 48/25 49/15 50/2 62/14 69/9 70/4 93/22 93/24 97/6 104/22 105/19 106/17 109/18 109/22 114/20 115/17 123/21 133/3 138/2 140/24 143/12 159/6 162/22 163/18 165/11 168/15 171/7 177/24 179/4 179/21 181/8 183/10 183/17 185/16 185/20 186/15 187/10 188/11 190/7 190/16 192/6 193/18 198/14 200/9 201/10 206/16 207/5 209/6 213/13
putting [4] 8/1
117/22 117/23 133/9

## Q

QALY [5] 101/5 101/6
144/20 146/8 146/21
Quad [1] 31/23
quadrilateral [2]
184/3 187/6
quality [4] 14/23 20/4
58/10 101/13
quandary [1] 179/22
quantification [1] 207/15
quantify [1] 146/5
quantifying [2] 146/7 204/5
quantitative [1]
113/3
quantum [1] 171/15
quarter [1] 100/25
question [45] 8/1
8/11 11/5 11/19 34/5
36/12 36/13 37/5 40/25 42/7 51/16
55/10 57/18 60/10 72/14 90/2 93/23 96/23 100/13 112/8 112/17 125/20 131/1 134/13 136/13 139/12 148/10 151/2 155/9 165/4 166/24 167/1
170/22 175/21 178/8 183/20 189/19 197/8 197/23 197/23 198/2 198/5 202/7 209/19 213/5
questioning [1] 163/10
questions [39] 1/7 31/5 34/15 44/3 62/25 103/10 159/24 163/12

163/14 163/16 163/20 rarely [2] 3/7 103/5 168/24 169/7 169/9 Rashford [1] 161/17 169/11 176/21 177/1 $\quad$ Rashford's [1] 178/7 179/23 187/11 187/24
187/16 187/17 192/18 rate [4] 60/6 99/9 193/15 196/15 197/2 $101 / 20$ 126/14 200/19 200/20 208/16 rates [7] 60/5 60/9 208/17 217/5 217/7 69/8 126/6 126/18 217/9 217/11 217/13 212/19 213/2 217/15 217/17 217/19 rather [9] 4/18 17/22 217/21
quick [3] 13/14 78/14 83/18
quickly [5] 24/1 24/7 37/16 59/6 144/20
quite [20] 4/21 16/13
19/7 22/7 24/1 31/9
35/6 36/22 47/2 66/25
89/15 89/24 134/21
142/17 156/7 160/6
185/24 188/14 189/11
209/15
quote [4] 28/6 32/14 36/1 157/2
quoted [1] 81/15
quotes [1] 34/1
quoting [4] 111/7
111/25 112/5 113/5

## R

R rate [1] 101/20
Raab [1] 31/25
raged [2] 5/23 46/8
raging [1] 45/22
raise [12] $37 / 7$ 71/1
119/10 119/22 121/18
122/9 124/22 132/24
170/23 171/2 173/16 182/17
raised [28] 29/5
36/22 36/24 70/7
100/1 103/22 103/23 105/23 106/4 120/7
120/16 121/3 121/5
121/7 121/9 121/10
121/21 123/1 137/24 139/2 139/15 139/18 169/21 171/2 179/1 180/14 183/22 189/17 raising [5] 100/8
128/18 172/16 173/15 174/18
raison [1] 35/5 raison d'être [1] 35/5 ran [2] 123/23 129/20 range [16] $7 / 2$ 40/15 102/8 102/11 115/14 132/10 134/7 149/10 150/17 150/22 150/23 151/5 151/18 162/22 204/18 208/2
rapidly [2] 106/13 147/5
rare [1] 71/2

37/6 67/24 103/21
105/19 183/8 189/2 209/5
ratio [1] 61/17
rational [2] 153/12 154/16
rationale [2] 140/13 141/17
rationales [2] 139/19 139/22
ratios [3] 56/17 57/5 102/11
re [21] 13/6 28/18
82/2 82/23 90/22 91/3
95/14 98/11 107/21
115/10 115/18 116/8
118/19 119/6 121/1
121/20 122/1 122/6
199/9 199/10 200/10
re-examined [1] 107/21
re-impose [1] 98/11
re-open [4] 82/2
116/8 122/1 200/10
re-opened [3] 82/23
90/22 115/10
re-opening [12] 13/6
28/18 91/3 95/14
115/18 118/19 119/6
121/1 121/20 122/6
199/9 199/10
reach [2] 177/22 216/11
reached [10] 44/14
45/15 47/23 48/10
50/14 53/14 64/20
87/7 87/15 96/21
reaches [1] 134/18
reaching [3] 74/23 75/16 134/9
reacted [2] 49/13
211/1
reacting [1] 181/4
read [11] 13/18 39/15
39/16 40/21 95/10
98/4 112/4 132/5
132/6 134/22 136/18
read-out [1] 39/15
read-outs [1] 39/16
reading [2] 41/9 88/7
readout [2] 39/2 78/14
ready [1] 19/21
real [6] 15/8 69/1
real... [4] 89/12 93/6
101/19 197/18
real-time [2] 15/8 93/6
realise [2] 129/9 129/24
realised [1] 163/23 realistically [1] 210/5 reality [4] 21/25
26/24 31/10 56/1
really [9] 11/5 21/13
58/1 60/12 72/15 82/9 141/17 145/16 151/3
reason [9] 55/9 63/24
69/7 132/14 140/11 140/18 179/3 207/17 212/25
reasonable [15] 33/5
33/15 33/19 38/1
122/4 142/6 151/1
157/10 157/12 157/19
157/24 159/12 190/3
190/13 210/11
reasonably [1] 85/2
reasons [13] 89/25
117/23 120/22 122/22 158/19 158/20 168/15 203/11 204/18 206/4 207/20 212/19 214/15
reassure [1] 75/14 recall [59] 4/14 4/19 4/21 32/7 39/15 45/1 47/25 53/2 53/15
53/24 56/4 56/22 57/7 62/10 63/11 63/14 67/8 67/18 67/22 69/2 72/19 73/14 84/13 84/15 85/6 85/9 87/6 87/8 94/3 94/13 95/9 95/17 95/19 96/24 98/24 99/1 107/21 114/15 119/3 120/18 121/4 149/22 149/23 161/16 169/22 169/24 170/1 170/15 170/20 178/12 178/13 183/25 189/3 189/7 191/7 191/12 198/19 201/13 204/4
recap [1] 93/4
recapped [1] 92/20 receive [1] 80/12 received [12] 18/12 63/4 63/6 65/15 69/5 84/1 127/24 150/24 177/19 182/21 188/23 215/3
receiver [1] 63/18
receiving [5] 52/21
94/19 169/22 174/6 201/14
reception [1] 87/3
recipients [3] 43/4 78/7 86/12
recognise [1] 113/21 recognised [3]
109/21 173/4 202/2
recognition [1] 109/10
recollect [6] 33/24
72/23 72/24 138/23
162/6 162/8
recollection [28]
18/25 19/13 19/17 21/13 23/15 23/20 24/2 24/11 24/24 25/2 48/24 50/2 51/21 53/3 65/19 89/14 97/14 100/16 100/17 103/15 110/25 111/19 128/18 139/18 165/21 166/16 186/9 206/15
recollections [3]
53/16 64/14 150/16
recommend [1]
65/23
recommendation [9]
4/20 109/6 110/10 110/13 111/25 112/3 113/11 113/14 151/25 reflections [8] 58/7
recommendations
[5] 52/16 65/21
112/6 133/4 133/8 recommended [5]
72/25 108/17 110/16
117/11 122/3
record [18] 5/4 27/25 28/8 30/8 62/11 69/4 78/3 97/19 99/8 104/1 125/1 128/11 128/19 139/14 159/1 159/5 164/12 193/4
recorded [14] 4/1 5/3 29/8 29/13 29/23 30/9 30/12 54/1 67/5 96/8 106/7 153/5 154/1 159/21
records [1] 28/13 recovery [1] 78/9 reduce [3] 113/1 146/22 153/21 reduced [2] 113/4 118/10
reduces [1] 98/12 reducing [2] 208/1 212/22
reduction [5] 107/18 110/17 110/23 119/4 122/18
refer [8] 4/15 7/10 13/2 30/17 45/13 84/13 91/6 135/16 reference [19] 33/25 41/2 41/9 44/4 44/9 64/21 78/23 79/1 79/16 79/23 83/24

86/13 91/24 93/2 94/3 $201 / 25$
94/5 130/16 138/17
198/6
referenced [2] 18/3 165/24
references [3] 78/16 147/8 210/22
referred [13] 6/2
20/13 50/12 63/2
81/14 91/1 95/10
117/18 153/17 160/9
198/9 201/22 202/1
referring [11] $4 / 16$ 25/18 32/14 33/13 39/17 59/10 71/8 80/9 91/22 167/21 167/21 refers [10] 31/19
34/18 36/15 44/19
45/12 80/19 92/9
99/24 104/10 161/21
reflect [4] 133/18
150/1 153/10 195/6
reflected [3] 131/13 158/21 185/11
reflection [5] 12/8
59/1 133/14 135/22
146/14

131/11 133/2 141/21
142/6 142/14 185/12 193/20
refused [1] 175/6 regard [13] 24/10 25/3 28/16 72/23 73/20 85/23 103/24 131/11 165/20 184/25 187/4 192/1 204/14
regarding [2] 199/23 208/18
Regardless [1] 57/2
region [1] 60/19
regional [3] 157/11
157/18 157/20
Register [1] 185/15
regular [2] 13/1
103/8
regularly [2] 183/19 184/5
regulation [1] 164/16 regulations [8] 164/3
165/1 168/15 168/20
192/21 193/23 194/24 195/3
reimpose [1] 98/15
reintroduce [1]
154/16
reintroducing [1] 153/10
reiterate [2] 18/25 88/19
reject [2] 36/24 194/6 relate [1] 169/11 related [5] 26/10 26/11 29/3 29/4 171/5 35/10 175/4 182/3 204/4

60/11 69/12 213/6 213/9 155/12

189/13

202/2
relates [2] 169/14
relating [3] 3/10 6/5
relation [18] 8/6 14/7
50/15 60/3 60/5 68/21
78/17 84/1 97/20
98/18 157/7 177/5 179/18 179/19 179/22 181/24 183/21 203/17
relations [2] 81/4
relationship [5]
25/21 40/5 136/24
relative [3] 57/24
relatively [4] 126/2
132/4 165/18 186/3
relax [1] 98/7
relay [2] 52/15 137/3
relayed [4] 95/17
142/9 142/9 142/10
released [1] 175/16
relevant [15] 4/12
16/21 19/3 72/20
73/17 77/16 99/6
99/20 137/3 201/5
204/12 212/9 212/9
relevantly [1] 2/18
reluctance [1] 165/5
remain [1] 108/4
remained [3] 2/21
109/11 162/15
remains [3] 123/16
148/14 154/1
remarks [2] 118/5
remember [39] 23/21
55/2 56/10 56/19
58/21 59/13 60/15
60/16 61/6 61/10
62/10 64/13 64/14
66/12 67/2 67/10
82/17 84/22 89/10
96/7 102/2 102/2
102/6 104/5 110/11
134/23 138/24 139/15 $126 / 22$ 126/25 127/6
143/15 152/23 165/18 127/7 148/10 175/18 167/25 178/18 188/7 responses [1] 41/15 189/6 189/23 190/4 196/19 211/16
remind [1] 152/13
removed [1] 190/1
repeat [2] 16/5 216/7
repeatedly [1] 91/7
replaced [2] 189/13
report [4] 111/8
112/1 137/11 160/21
reports [2] 201/21
reprehensible [1] 191/17
represent [2] 196/17 199/4
representations [1] 120/18
request [1] 104/21
requested [1] 9/2
requests [1] 132/24
require [1] 179/24
required [9] 47/17
150/15 152/14 164/9 181/14 182/1 185/20
185/21 215/4
requirement [3]
30/23 144/11 150/12
requirements [2]
105/18 184/24
requires [2] 95/2
101/1
requiring [2] 181/16
183/23
reserved [2] 170/7 182/7
resignation [1] $2 / 24$
resistance [2] 89/15 187/24
resistant [1] 210/6
Resolution [1]
162/13
resolve [2] 92/19 110/19
resolved [2] 87/9 112/18
respect [6] 2/9 65/22
125/8 140/22 172/11 173/3
respectfully [1] 74/9
respectively [1]
124/12
respond [2] 32/25
171/21
responded [2]
132/23 132/25
responding [3] 23/2
50/5 104/1
response [13] 20/8
24/24 53/20 76/5
81/20 95/3 101/2
responsibility [11]
6/10 7/8 7/23 8/19
31/16 35/7 36/8 89/11
167/19 177/11 211/4
responsible [8] 6/8
11/1 102/23 125/3
150/6 166/1 166/3
195/22
responsibly [1]
102/18
responsiveness [1]
95/25
(84) real... - responsiveness
rest [5] 43/13 72/11
115/20 181/4 183/9
restaurant [3] 117/24
118/11 118/17
restaurants [6]
114/19 116/13 116/25
117/24 123/12 123/20
rested [2] 55/20
177/11
restraint [1] 188/3
restrict [2] 165/1
167/13
restrictions [5] 74/8
98/15 118/9 152/7
177/23
result [17] 2/5 43/15
44/24 75/5 181/18
188/23 190/10 190/19
199/7 200/2 201/23
201/24 202/4 202/22
203/7 206/10 210/14
resulting [1] 200/23
retail [21] 13/6 67/20
82/11 85/1 85/12
85/16 85/20 86/1 86/5 87/5 87/8 87/12 87/19 88/23 89/1 89/3 89/6
98/16 159/5 159/11
159/19
retain [3] 3/9 4/6 4/10
reticence [2] 82/21 165/6
reticent [1] 164/14 return [14] 78/21 82/4 82/22 87/2 90/17 98/14 107/13 119/16 124/2 127/16 163/3 183/20 187/19 216/17
returned [3] 117/15 190/12 190/13
returning [3] 82/5 120/9 200/2
Revenue [1] 126/9 reverse [2] 204/2 208/7
review [15] 17/12 108/20 110/9 110/11 110/15 110/16 111/1 111/3 111/13 111/13 113/13 114/9 194/16 198/13 206/22
reviewed [5] 42/12 166/16 168/2 196/6 211/16
reviewing [1] $42 / 2$ revisit [2] 120/19 158/3
revolved [2] 55/7 62/6
Richmond [1] 2/14 right [84] 7/13 9/12 21/7 21/21 24/4 25/7

30/14 38/22 39/17 42/8 42/12 42/20
44/25 46/11 47/11 48/15 49/24 51/19 54/3 54/10 54/15 56/4 57/9 57/10 60/18 60/25 61/20 62/14 68/5 73/19 77/8 77/18 80/4 80/11 81/7 83/2 84/24 87/17 89/21 90/20 91/14 91/17 95/8 102/4 103/6 104/4 104/16 104/17 104/18 107/10 118/20 120/24 120/24 122/8 122/24 125/20 127/11 roadmaps [2] 28/16 130/12 137/9 142/1 50/15
142/18 146/11 149/18 robust [1] 51/6
151/21 152/20 154/14 robustness [2] 53/3
155/5 155/15 157/13 100/21
159/20 173/23 184/11 role [11] 5/11 6/3 6/8 188/2 188/6 191/24 192/15 195/13 196/8 196/13 205/5 208/13
210/5 210/18 211/18
rightly [10] 19/22 20/17 32/17 41/21 78/8 84/25 102/17 113/12 188/23 192/9 rights [1] 187/18 rigorous [1] $27 / 4$ rigour [1] 107/7 ringfenced [1] 176/18
ringing [1] 102/18 rise [14] 161/9 202/7 202/14 202/24 203/21 204/6 204/9 204/16 204/18 205/2 205/20 205/25 206/1 207/18
risen [1] 147/6
RISHI [6] 1/6 1/10 27/11 211/1 211/3 217/3
Rishi Sunak [1] 1/10 rising [5] 78/20 126/14 149/1 207/9 207/17
risk [48] 41/13 44/1 84/10 90/24 92/9 92/16 94/8 100/9
100/15 101/23 102/14 103/10 110/6 110/6 110/18 110/20 110/22 111/10 111/12 112/8 112/16 112/17 113/1 113/3 113/17 113/19 114/8 114/8 114/23 115/2 117/9 117/21 118/17 119/14 120/1 121/18 121/21 122/7 128/9 147/19 154/8 185/15 185/15 195/9 199/5 199/11 199/24

200/4
riskier [7] 95/15 96/19 98/1 98/9 100/11 101/18 102/1
riskiest [1] 120/10
risks [5] 102/22
112/12 113/23 120/15 122/23
risky [1] 119/5
road [1] 94/10
roadmap [12] 8/7
77/17 81/9 87/1 92/13
96/23 97/20 98/19
118/7 206/16 206/20 206/23

6/11 8/10 8/25 26/7
27/20 138/23 186/14 193/2
rolling [1] 13/4
room [5] 18/16 19/24 43/14 94/7 118/3
round [3] 20/2 169/4 192/5
route [2] 147/18 153/22
rule [19] 8/18 12/11 12/15 107/19 107/19 107/20 108/1 108/2 108/3 109/11 109/16 109/17 109/19 109/21 110/23 119/4 122/19 127/1 147/11
rules [1] 212/23
run [3] 110/7 151/14 215/16
running [3] 72/1
212/11 215/15

## S

S structure [1] 21/23
safe [16] 115/8
115/22 117/25 118/19 118/24 120/25 121/20 121/25 122/6 123/20 124/2 127/18 195/7 199/6 199/7 200/7
safeguard [7] 82/16 83/16 118/24 120/25 122/5 127/12 127/19 safeguarded [1] 117/14
safely [3] 116/1 123/24 200/10
SAGE [97] 20/3 23/24 24/10 24/25 35/18 40/8 49/1 49/4 49/12 49/21 54/20 59/7 65/6 65/21 65/22

66/21 66/24 67/4 73/1 73/21 85/19 94/22 95/10 96/7 96/17 97/10 97/16 98/4 99/7 99/13 99/14 109/12 109/14 109/17 112/9 114/20 115/5 128/25 129/8 129/9 129/14 129/18 129/19 129/19 129/20 130/8 130/16 131/6 131/12 131/20 131/23 132/7 132/20 132/23 132/25 133/2 134/12 134/18 135/4 135/5 135/20 135/21 135/24 136/4 136/6 136/10 136/13 136/15 136/18 136/24 137/1 137/6 137/10 137/13 137/16 137/17 138/9 138/14 139/4 139/13 139/20 140/12 140/16 140/17 141/4 141/14 141/17 141/22 142/3 142/4 142/13 149/6 150/24 152/21 153/17 159/9 160/16
SAGE's [3] 131/16
133/24 134/24
said [149] $3 / 93 / 11$ 3/22 4/23 4/25 5/1 6/14 6/17 7/13 14/19 15/14 18/25 20/5 24/4 24/21 27/13 28/6 28/10 31/1 32/17 33/20 33/24 35/19 35/19 35/20 35/23 36/2 37/12 37/16 37/25 38/1 38/5 38/17 40/12 40/14 42/21 42/25 44/23 51/19 52/15 53/23 54/12 54/21 55/24 57/12 62/11 62/16 64/18 66/6 66/17 66/21 67/4 67/13 73/15 75/17 76/14 80/7 80/23 81/18 85/19 85/23 87/10 87/12 87/16 88/12 88/18 91/2 92/4 98/8 98/25 99/5 102/5 107/4 110/21 111/25 112/2 112/5 114/11 115/25 119/5 122/1 123/20 124/21 124/22 125/1 126/10 127/10 128/1 128/3 128/12 128/14 128/16 129/8 129/23 133/10 134/18 135/9 136/25 141/9 144/16 148/10 149/6 149/17 152/9 153/4 154/11 154/11 154/15 155/14 158/14 159/7

159/11 161/2 161/23 162/4 162/5 162/13 164/12 166/18 168/10 168/12 168/18 168/22 170/14 174/14 174/16 176/15 182/2 184/9 185/2 186/5 186/12 187/5 188/20 191/5 191/11 191/12 194/16 199/9 201/9 203/8 204/17 205/14 206/3 206/19 207/18 208/8 211/2 213/3
Sajid [1] 2/20
Sajid Javid [1] 2/20 same [51] 16/21
16/24 22/10 25/22 26/25 27/2 29/18 30/15 39/24 39/25 41/25 49/2 49/17 49/19 50/13 50/14 59/16 67/4 67/11 73/2 73/9 73/22 90/20 93/10 99/23 114/15 114/23 116/3 117/4 117/13 121/14 122/18 129/4 130/12 131/9 141/11 142/12 142/25 155/20 156/3 158/13 160/16 160/18 164/19 175/21 175/23 180/19 189/17 200/6 211/19 215/11
sand [1] 20/14
sat [4] 45/21 110/9 116/9 124/8
Saunders [1] 196/17 Saunders Law [1] 196/17
save [3] 53/13 77/3 199/20
saved [1] 160/23
saving [1] 197/16 saw [9] 6/3 7/21 12/12 12/13 18/2 18/2 65/3 103/5 203/24 say [97] 1/22 4/9 9/12 9/13 9/18 9/18 10/21 11/20 12/5 14/18 14/23 15/17 16/8 16/18 19/4 20/17 20/20 21/3 21/11 23/8 23/17 25/5 26/9 26/11 26/20 27/15 27/21 27/23 28/6 30/16 30/22 31/24 32/12 $34 / 535 / 736 / 537 / 18$ 38/21 43/11 49/6 51/9 57/6 61/19 61/20 62/2 64/18 74/15 77/13 78/8 78/10 81/14 81/16 84/25 88/25 90/3 91/13 91/14
92/24 93/16 95/20
say... [37] 96/5 100/6 105/13 106/3 107/6 114/24 122/19 129/7 130/12 133/4 133/22 133/22 135/8 135/12 135/21 144/10 145/21 145/23 148/3 148/20 152/17 158/17 160/18 162/6 162/8 165/7 169/25 171/13 171/16 173/16 175/2 191/18 194/2 209/1 209/23 210/5 213/5
saying [27] 2/1 23/4
34/1 38/17 45/1 50/17 53/25 56/24 60/1 61/4 61/7 88/25 96/9 113/6 149/14 154/1 154/19 155/25 157/5 157/15 162/9 164/23 170/18 174/10 179/20 188/25 195/24
saying: [1] 71/12 saying: we're [1] 71/12
says [23] 27/13
27/21 27/24 28/5 31/4 34/12 39/8 41/5 73/8 78/11 87/21 88/3 88/3 92/7 92/10 93/14 111/7 112/25 138/11 166/7 171/24 177/21 216/5
scale [5] 74/7 192/7 212/8 214/3 214/6
scarring [12] 74/15 75/1 202/5 202/18 202/23 202/25 203/2 203/6 203/11 203/14 204/10 204/15
scenario [1] 93/2
scenarios [1] 119/15 scenes [3] 60/17 60/19 60/21
sceptical [1] 210/8 scheme [58] 6/13
98/20 114/14 114/15 114/17 115/3 117/19 119/11 121/13 122/15 122/16 123/10 124/19 124/23 125/10 125/12 125/16 125/23 126/7 126/12 127/25 128/8 150/13 164/15 164/22 169/15 169/19 170/2 170/16 170/19 176/7 184/10 184/12 193/21 193/22 194/2 194/4 194/7 197/3 199/2 199/23 200/11 205/21 209/4 210/7 210/10 210/12 211/11 211/11

211/14 211/17 211/24 $171 / 25$ 180/5 212/7 213/20 214/8 screens [2] 118/12 214/10 214/16 214/19 198/17
schemes [3] 162/14 screwed [1] 135/14 185/18 215/8
Scholar [2] 130/9 130/9
school [10] $87 / 3$
90/15 161/20 187/20 187/25 188/11 189/12 scrutiny [3] 61/6 189/21 190/15 191/17 105/21 107/7
schools [34] 49/10 49/14 54/23 66/11 67/18 73/1 73/8 73/21 85/4 85/23 86/7 86/18 86/23 87/7 87/11 87/19 87/24 88/2 88/14 88/16 89/1 89/10 89/13 89/16 89/20 89/25 98/13 98/14 101/22 119/6 119/15 120/1 120/10 133/25
schoolteachers [1] 89/18
science [13] 109/15 109/20 111/22 131/3 133/16 133/18 133/19 secretaries [2] 45/17 133/21 134/1 134/6 134/7 142/4 150/3 scientific [37] 35/19 35/20 36/1 45/19 50/6 50/6 53/22 53/25 56/7 61/2 62/13 63/23 64/15 77/19 95/12 96/6 96/16 109/16 111/4 111/23 113/9 113/17 120/8 120/13 128/24 133/8 133/11 135/8 137/15 141/2 149/13 150/5 151/18 152/19 154/21 196/22 206/18
scientists [15] 35/17 50/10 68/4 96/22 100/19 103/17 104/2 115/20 115/25 133/21 134/14 135/14 139/8 150/18 150/22
Scotland [6] 172/20 176/3 176/9 177/10 179/8 179/23
Scottish [9] 174/5 177/3 179/18 180/16 181/12 181/15 181/23 182/19 183/21
Scottish Government security [1] 173/2 [6] 179/18 180/16 see [43] 7/24 10/12 181/12 181/15 181/23 183/21

## Scottish

Government's [1] 182/19
screen [3] 162/1
script [6] 31/6 31/7
34/2 34/3 34/17 34/20
scroll [1] 84/3
scrutinise [2] 43/10 211/18 second [27] 15/24 19/5 54/6 54/6 81/8 86/14 88/10 88/11 96/4 97/22 108/12 125/3 133/16 140/6 148/15 153/5 153/7 153/8 156/18 163/22 164/13 167/1 170/21 171/5 173/8 202/3 202/21
seconded [2] 146/12 146/12
secondly [2] 44/9 131/24
secretariat [1]
129/19
secreta
$108 / 7$
secretary [34] 2/17
38/24 39/8 41/5 64/3 78/7 86/12 87/21 90/3 90/8 91/22 98/5
102/17 105/1 105/15 108/22 109/5 109/14 111/3 114/21 115/5 122/12 123/6 128/6 130/10 152/5 166/2 166/13 167/18 167/24 168/9 184/2 184/5 187/5
sector [17] 6/10 83/10 83/16 85/3 89/15 116/12 116/15 122/21 123/5 126/14 127/8 127/13 148/6 198/2 198/9 198/22 200/3
sectors [13] 80/5 82/1 82/8 82/10 85/1 86/18 87/22 88/1 88/14 95/1 178/3 197/7 197/7
secure [6] 115/15 118/6 123/21 124/5 199/8 200/9 $\begin{array}{lll}11 / 7 & 13 / 8 & 13 / 15 \\ 14 / 1 & 14 / 18 & 14 / 13 \\ 14 / 21\end{array}$ 15/1 15/14 17/12 17/16 17/19 25/9 26/22 27/18 35/16 38/9 39/14 39/15

39/16 41/2 43/5 53/12 $\quad 114 / 3$
56/15 58/4 75/24 79/4 sentiment [2] 191/9 80/1 80/7 89/3 90/10 191/16

91/25 92/23 103/4
103/8 146/24 147/12 152/21 169/2 169/24
seeing [5] 98/24
155/17 155/22 157/18 197/17
seek [3] 151/1 151/15 152/7
seemed [2] 82/20 153/11
seemingly [1] 45/25 seems [3] 178/24 204/6 204/24
seen [15] 23/2 77/11 124/21 153/3 156/16 160/5 202/7 203/21 203/22 204/8 204/10 205/1 205/3 205/3 205/9
self [29] 36/18 49/9 119/15 133/1 181/14 181/16 181/18 181/20 sequencing [2] $86 / 9$ 182/1 183/23 184/10 180/2
184/12 184/16 184/19 series [3] 22/1 22/9 184/23 185/3 190/3 23/16
208/19 208/20 208/25 serious [2] 71/2 209/6 209/17 209/22 99/25
210/9 211/13 211/23 212/3 213/19 213/20
self-employed [3]
184/12 190/3 213/20
self-evident [3] 36/18 133/1 184/19 self-isolate [4]
181/14 182/1 209/17 211/13
self-isolated [2]
181/20 184/16
self-isolating [2]
185/3 210/9
self-isolation [13]
49/9 119/15 181/16 181/18 183/23 184/10 175/14 209/15 212/7 184/23 208/19 208/20 214/7
208/25 209/22 211/23 212/3
self-isolators [1] 209/6
seminar [1] 138/7
send [2] $3 / 19$ 96/15
senior [2] 6/18 80/16
sense [14] 19/16
28/22 33/1 34/17
39/22 45/2 52/18
67/23 85/19 88/8
88/21 92/22 94/1
178/16
sensible [2] 122/5 153/14
sensitive [1] 123/7
sent [3] 85/11 90/10
separate [7] 36/12 36/13 99/17 139/21 140/13 141/18 168/19 separately [2] 57/16 181/6
separation [1] 19/14 September [28]
38/18 64/19 98/14
119/7 119/15 147/3
147/4 147/7 147/14
148/4 148/12 149/20
149/21 152/25 156/14
164/3 177/17 177/21
180/8 209/16 210/13 211/5 211/13 211/15 211/24 213/3 214/8 214/10
September 2020 [1] 64/19
September/October
[1] 147/3
servants [2] $4 / 2$ 29/14
service [3] 81/24
115/16 129/2
services [3] 6/10 6/14 195/16
session [2] 65/4 102/7
set [27] 3/7 3/14 9/21
11/14 12/22 14/7 27/5
28/15 28/23 73/6 74/5
74/12 74/18 75/21
79/13 95/22 100/17
103/15 111/11 118/9
118/21 171/12 171/13
175/14 209/15 212/7
214/7
sets [1] 165/22
setting [3] 11/1 14/4 193/7
settings [2] 167/14 194/25
settlement [9] 170/6
170/14 172/13 172/22
174/9 180/21 180/24
182/11 185/24
settlements [1]
174/22
seven [1] 147/5
seven-day [1] 147/5
severity [1] 101/9
shall [5] 98/3 107/13
163/1 163/3 216/17
shape [3] 54/9 65/2
shape... [1] 125/3
share [2] 28/10 79/11
shared [5] 9/25 12/24
13/1 46/5 130/2
sharing [4] 10/2 10/2
20/5 26/24
sharp [1] 147/7
she [7] 39/17 87/21
93/14 103/1 138/5
138/11 181/12
she'd [1] 193/21
sheet [1] 176/5
shelf [2] 19/22 146/4
shielding [1] 14/4
shielding/social [1] 14/4
shift [2] 118/12 198/18
shock' [1] 84/7
shopping [1] 212/22
short [14] 37/20
62/21 75/3 107/15
132/4 163/5 163/18 163/20 166/15 193/25 195/1 197/2 197/21 215/15
shortages [1] 165/3
shorter [1] 107/10
shorthand [1] 39/3
shortly [6] 9/19 68/23
104/9 107/19 179/14
179/14
shot [1] 4/22
should [43] 5/8 8/5
30/16 30/21 42/13
43/11 49/8 49/24
52/10 54/25 57/2 58/5 62/9 63/5 63/12 65/1
65/12 67/21 69/16
70/11 72/4 76/25
78/19 80/18 83/14
84/22 85/24 92/19
95/19 96/10 106/16
111/9 111/11 112/2
113/7 127/2 128/5 134/4 139/16 140/4 185/16 191/25 195/25
shouldn't [4] 80/13
135/14 146/3 146/22
show [2] 68/13 120/9
showed [5] 18/4
107/25 116/19 157/8 181/15
showing [6] 65/25 69/23 91/2 145/5 148/5 188/2
shown [2] 19/12 55/3
shows [11] 10/15
39/12 42/17 95/23
100/20 159/1 159/2 159/6 160/1 162/12 162/23
shut [5] 23/13 67/21 82/1 93/7 159/4
shutting [1] 159/8 sick [3] 61/16 208/21 209/4
sickness [1] 207/10 side [3] 31/5 34/15 38/4
side-effects [2] 31/5 34/15
sidelined [1] 18/22
sides [3] 113/12 208/24 209/21
sight [1] 134/11 sighted [1] 166/14 sign [1] 210/16
signage [1] 118/12 signal [1] 143/25 signed [6] 1/13 46/25 63/22 115/9 200/8 200/12
signed off [5] 46/25 63/22 115/9 200/8 200/12
significance [5] 3/25 25/11 29/9 29/11 100/4
significant [20] 19/17 69/8 82/6 100/15
103/22 107/25 115/14 118/9 120/1 127/3
173/11 193/6 199/19 200/22 201/3 205/17 210/7 210/8 213/1 214/2
significantly [5] 15/4 15/21 118/10 126/5 213/17
signs [1] 69/23
similar [7] 135/17
136/5 140/10 175/1
175/14 186/6 186/6
simple [3] 134/6
146/23 204/1
simpler [3] 33/1
33/16 38/3
simplicity [4] 38/2
134/9 159/16 159/17
simplify [1] 32/23
simplistic [1] 133/22
simply [8] 34/1 58/3
113/20 122/24 145/10 153/21 205/6 215/6
since [2] $4 / 24$ 202/8 single [9] 29/12 29/22 30/11 120/10 131/17 138/10 138/13 209/23 210/1
singular [2] 131/22 134/2
Sir [15] 45/23 95/11 95/12 119/2 124/11 124/12 130/7 130/9 130/9 138/17 148/9

161/21 161/22 196/23 $6 / 6$ 8/24 18/3 27/24 210/22
Sir Patrick [1] 161/22 Sir Patrick Vallance [3] 130/7 138/17 196/23
Sir Patrick Vallance's
[2] 45/23 161/21
Sir Patrick's [1] 210/22
Sir Tom Scholar [1] 130/9
sit [7] 12/9 20/20
21/3 114/2 195/12 196/7 204/25
sitreps [1] 60/2
sitting [2] 25/25 49/7
situation [7] 16/22
52/1 73/18 77/8 81/25 190/14 194/5
situations [1] 25/11
six [2] $50 / 24$ 211/22
six months [1]
211/22
slide [1] 92/4
slides [1] 18/4
slight [1] 137/3
slightly [8] 62/23
77/14 95/2 141/25
192/4 209/19 214/19
214/22
slim [1] 125/21
slow [3] 65/18 78/1 143/23
slower [1] 62/23
small [2] 22/2 200/20
smaller [3] 40/16 41/24 43/17
Smith [1] 1/17
so [268]
social [23] 14/4 14/8 17/11 31/20 32/3
35/22 74/7 82/15 89/8 113/24 115/15 118/9 165/10 165/12 165/20 166/21 167/12 193/1 193/19 195/23 197/15 211/3 213/9
social care [9] 165/10 165/12 165/20 166/21 167/12 193/1 193/19 195/23 213/9 societal [5] 5/20 17/17 36/19 143/6 160/8
society [2] 46/16 82/12
socioeconomic [5]
7/3 137/14 137/17
199/15 211/1
sole [1] 9/14
solely [1] 9/11
solutions [1] 186/23
some [51] 3/3 5/5 5/9

28/8 28/24 32/18
33/22 41/23 41/24
62/25 69/20 69/23 72/8 75/21 80/15 84/18 90/23 99/9 118/25 125/21 125/25 126/3 126/13 128/15 129/24 130/2 131/10 132/22 134/6 138/14 141/21 150/18 151/6 160/2 160/22 166/17 166/20 167/10 173/5 194/2 195/1 195/24 196/22 198/19 207/3 209/13 210/4
somebody [3] 130/8 161/23 188/25
somehow [1] 21/11 someone [9] 42/17 46/25 47/1 130/1 132/14 137/2 146/15 204/5 209/24
something [67] 8/23 16/6 19/7 21/1 22/25 26/1 28/6 29/16 29/20 30/16 32/23 37/12 42/3 42/15 67/9 70/2 71/9 80/21 84/20 91/10 93/9 94/22 98/21 101/22 103/6 106/17 108/14 108/17 112/17 117/8 117/11 117/12 121/22 126/23 127/5 135/23 136/6 136/23 137/24 138/10 139/14 139/25 144/15 145/22 146/16 156/15 166/22 167/17 168/8 168/18 168/21 169/20 169/24 171/1 172/25 174/7 179/7 183/13 186/20 189/14 196/8 199/13 202/18 203/3 205/1 206/20 207/19 somewhat [2] 63/16 0/22
somewhere [1] 44/22
soon [2] 85/2 214/6
sooner [3] 52/18
67/14 92/8
sophistication [1] 15/5
sorry [21] 2/1 36/12 37/5 57/15 59/10
59/20 71/20 83/21
101/12 107/12 108/23
130/17 143/23 143/24
143/24 169/6 197/8
197/20 206/5 206/6 215/15
sort [5] 14/15 17/16 17/17 47/18 106/16 sort of [4] 14/15

17/16 17/17 106/16 sorts [3] 18/11
106/19 145/9
sought [2] 138/3 193/6
sounds [1] 168/2 source [2] 16/9 92/17
sources [1] 15/9
space [2] 98/13 208/3
spaces [1] 114/19
Spain [1] 153/3
speak [4] 61/22
68/20 185/25 186/1
speaking [1] 69/3
speaks [1] 185/23
spearheaded [1] 161/17
specific [27] $8 / 18$
48/13 55/2 65/22
66/16 73/14 112/24
114/4 120/17 133/3
133/4 133/8 144/5
159/18 166/18 178/12
178/13 178/16 183/25 184/15 194/10 196/2 197/4 197/23 197/24 197/24 204/5
specifically [22]
34/12 45/12 53/15 56/4 72/23 79/4 84/15 84/23 96/20 115/8 120/14 156/20 158/17 166/21 166/24 169/17 181/2 191/23 197/4
202/1 203/16 213/14
specificity [1] 178/19
Spectator [9] 27/11
32/15 33/13 81/13
116/22 129/7 135/12 144/9 145/20
spectrum [9] 95/15
96/20 97/5 98/1 98/9 100/12 101/18 102/1 151/18
speculate [2] 194/15 196/7
speed [11] 15/18 21/17 47/7 49/12 90/23 96/23 105/25
106/12 107/3 108/23 108/24
spend [6] 104/24
105/22 165/16 173/13 176/19 209/25
spending [8] 70/16 104/23 166/4 172/18 182/6 182/8 188/3 201/23
spent [5] 63/15 188/9 190/4 195/18 210/19
sphere [1] 134/25
spheres [1] 46/14
spirit [2] 2/8 2/11
split [1] 154/1
spoke [1] $72 / 18$ spoken [2] 22/21 185/11
sponsoring [1] 132/11
spread [1] 192/24
spreading [1] 147/5
spring [1] 63/8
squad [1] 160/4
squeeze [1] 104/8
Ss [2] 11/4 30/4 stacks [1] 140/12 staff [11] 56/17 61/15 164/4 164/15 164/24 167/2 167/7 167/13 193/10 194/10 195/8
staffing [1] 57/5
stage [8] 84/5 86/17
95/22 96/21 100/19
104/3 165/3 206/24
stages [1] 199/22 stamp [2] 116/4 123/6
stand [1] 90/11
standard [5] 34/18
93/16 126/21 172/15 184/3
standards [1] 192/8
standing [1] 123/3 standpoint [1] 188/4
stark [1] 93/4
start [6] 2/1 3/3 22/13 145/8 188/2 190/23
started [5] 37/19 95/19 105/2 206/7 208/5
starting [3] 53/18 69/14 78/24
state [13] 25/11 64/3 81/14 108/7 111/9 114/21 115/5 122/12 123/6 128/6 168/9 190/14 211/4
stated [4] 150/2
150/10 156/15 161/13
statement [43] 1/11 1/15 1/20 3/7 5/15 12/22 12/23 25/8 52/15 74/2 74/6 74/20 75/13 75/21 76/15 76/18 83/10 83/19 83/21 96/15 104/10 111/1 112/21 114/6 121/8 129/5 131/9 163/22 164/13 171/8 171/9 171/11 171/13 171/14 171/23 171/24 175/2 181/9 192/25 193/10 193/25 201/8 201/19
statements [1] 1/17
states [1] 181/12 stating [1] 95/5
Statistics [1] 138/19 statutory [2] 208/21 209/4
stay [4] 60/14 62/4 76/21 77/3
stay-at-home [3]
60/14 62/4 76/21
steer [2] 43/21 143/24
stenographer [2] 78/4 108/25
step [16] 20/3 58/3 73/12 79/10 96/1
96/22 97/21 97/22 97/22 97/23 103/19 103/25 103/25 103/25 186/7 206/22
step 1 [1] 97/21
step 2 [2] 96/1 103/25
step 3 [2] 96/22 103/25
Stephen [2] 138/16 138/19
Stephen Aldridge [2] 138/16 138/19
steps [3] 41/3 41/3 98/18
Steve [1] 156/3
Steve Powis [1]
156/3
still [10] 34/19 78/20
147/22 157/12 157/20
167/4 167/5 179/17
207/21 213/22
stood [1] 49/19
stop [4] 81/16 192/23 194/24 211/2
stopping [1] 193/8
straightforward [4] 46/25 146/19 146/25 204/2
straightforwardly [1] 209/19
strategic [1] 57/16 strategy [23] 19/15 32/21 32/22 33/1 33/12 33/17 34/11 37/25 39/9 53/21 53/23 54/2 63/21 64/10 64/11 78/21 96/9 96/12 96/13 102/8 147/2 147/3 147/13
stream [1] 100/3 Street [8] 29/19 45/22 47/20 47/20 50/18 142/22 149/21 187/22
strength [5] 24/19 39/12 39/20 40/6 176/6
stress [3] 71/18 72/19 84/21
strike [1] 150/25
stringent [2] 65/23 153/23
strong [18] 18/24
21/13 24/11 24/24
48/24 50/2 64/14
65/19 71/17 81/24
96/11 103/15 122/21 150/16 152/17 152/17 153/13 165/21
strongly [4] 52/17
99/1 121/23 211/2
structural [2] 197/1
199/3
structure [9] 12/19 19/6 19/14 19/15 20/18 21/5 21/23 24/5 24/5
structured [1] 176/17
structures [10] 9/20
11/2 11/14 21/6 25/12
27/3 27/5 141/19
142/2 187/3
stuck [1] 51/10
students [1] 90/19
study [1] 213/4
stuff [3] 27/15 27/23
28/7
Sturgeon [3] 177/15
178/25 181/9
style [1] 41/19
subject [4] 38/25
83/7 91/23 132/21
submission [5] 126/9 126/11 164/20 169/22 170/2
submissions [4]
216/10 216/12 216/15 216/16
submit [1] 216/15
submitted [1] 35/17
subsequent [6] 55/1
71/7 101/3 180/14 188/5 205/25
subsequently [4]
135/5 144/16 179/11 212/15
subset [1] 203/10
substance [2] 32/16
66/4
substantive [1] 73/6
substantively [1] 106/4
such [16] 3/15 5/21
48/1 48/11 65/17
113/23 137/22 162/12
164/9 184/8 185/19
191/8 191/16 198/17
199/4 214/5
suffer [1] 201/3
suffered [1] 2/3
sufferers [1] 203/20
suffering [1] 207/9
suffice [2] 132/12 153/21
sufficient [1] 54/25 sufficiently [2] 51/15 76/24
suggest [8] 44/6
59/24 89/23 106/19
121/5 125/22 125/25
128/14
suggested [12]
18/23 72/25 79/19 81/11 101/8 105/18 117/7 147/1 151/12 161/23 161/25 215/1
suggesting [2] 122/8 151/15
suggestion [6] 29/6 36/24 40/2 62/7 72/9 80/13
suggestions [3]
65/23 186/13 186/21
suggests [5] 44/10
67/24 103/21 204/8 204/17
suite [1] 67/16
summaries [1] 130/3
summarised [1] 83/19
summarising [1]
77/8
summary [12] 7/12
14/2 17/12 74/20
75/11 104/14 105/4
109/25 112/1 112/5
112/23 137/7
summer [11] 86/16
88/12 89/2 123/24
187/20 188/1 189/22
206/7 209/13 212/6
212/13
SUNAK [59] 1/6 1/10
1/11 2/13 3/3 10/15
22/13 27/11 31/4 34/9 36/16 44/3 47/19 48/8 53/2 74/9 75/14 76/19
90/21 92/13 96/16
97/9 105/11 110/21
113/13 117/17 121/7
123/9 127/23 128/24 132/1 136/11 139/9
145/18 151/14 157/6 163/14 165/5 169/2 173/20 175/21 181/1 183/2 187/17 190/20 191/3 192/12 194/5 196/16 198/3 200/20 207/7 208/17 209/18 210/6 210/23 211/22 213/5 217/3
Sunday [1] 13/19
Sundays [1] 59/12
supplement [1]
216/15
supplemented [2]
118/15 198/11
supply [6] 15/1 74/17
164/24 194/4 194/9 194/22
support [54] 6/13
29/7 76/12 110/3
122/22 125/17 126/5
127/8 150/9 154/21
160/25 162/10 162/24
163/17 164/15 164/24
165/12 167/13 172/3
172/7 172/12 175/15
176/12 177/24 178/3
181/13 181/25 184/12
185/4 186/13 186/15
188/18 190/7 190/15
190/16 191/22 192/2
192/6 195/2 202/11
208/3 208/7 208/18
208/25 209/10 209/17
209/22 210/7 210/25
213/11 213/21 213/23
214/9 214/11
supported [7] 52/18
109/15 156/10 160/15 168/8 168/13 196/3
supportive [1] 78/21 supports [2] 141/17 162/17
suppose [1] 150/22
suppress [4] 54/3
64/12 65/1 102/9
suppression [2]
57/13 63/8
sure [48] 6/4 6/20
9/19 10/25 20/10 24/7
25/1 28/13 35/8 36/8
37/5 39/21 40/22
45/11 48/4 51/1 52/4
52/12 57/17 71/12
80/8 81/1 92/15 102/5
102/10 115/24 128/11
132/18 133/15 134/3
134/21 136/3 146/19
147/11 162/10 169/20
171/2 180/2 186/21
192/11 192/16 194/11
198/16 199/13 207/15
209/9 210/19 214/23
surely [2] 111/15
121/20
surge [2] 53/12 55/17
surprised [2] 57/24 60/10
surprising [1] 42/16
surveys [1] 203/23
survive [2] 55/18
55/19
susceptible [1] 131/5
sustain [1] 190/4
sustainable [1]
190/11
Sweden [2] 149/25

Sweden... [1] 150/19 sworn [2] 1/6 217/3
sympathise [1] 32/21 sympathy [1] 33/5 symptoms [1] 212/22 synthesise [4] 10/4 19/25 80/15 145/14
system [24] 7/5 10/18 11/25 22/23 106/21 136/22 140/24 148/13 151/22 152/1 152/10 152/13 153/11 153/19 154/9 154/17 154/20 154/24 155/6 168/7 168/12 176/13 186/2 196/4
systems [3] 115/16 118/11 123/21

## T

table [2] 23/19 115/16
tail [1] 209/13
tail end [1] 209/13
take [42] 6/1 9/3
10/23 18/21 20/15 22/11 38/13 50/12 53/2 62/7 62/8 68/14 69/14 73/13 73/25 75/15 75/16 91/16 102/13 102/14 107/10 107/23 108/9 111/16 125/23 126/2 126/3 126/4 131/21 135/6 136/1 137/22 152/15 156/9 158/6 163/1 172/6 172/7 208/24 209/2 209/21 214/11
take-up [5] 125/23 126/2 126/3 126/4 214/11
taken [34] 2/5 5/19 8/3 11/16 18/11 24/1 30/16 30/21 33/16 41/4 43/19 45/8 45/25 46/18 52/14 55/22 55/23 56/2 56/23 61/25 67/17 89/14 101/19 161/7 173/3 175/7 175/18 177/7 198/20 204/12 207/12 209/11 209/19 210/4
taking [7] 18/19 58/2 81/8 91/9 102/7 143/24 167/23
talk [15] 26/10 29/3 31/3 33/17 34/11 36/14 48/14 48/17 48/23 56/5 85/15 90/8 152/22 155/14 197/22
talked [12] 45/6
47/12 60/17 68/9

115/9 119/25 135/18 terrible [1] 94/9 144/18 160/16 185/20 test [6] 41/22 94/16 190/20 195/21
talking [9] 25/17
34/10 34/22 64/15 80/17 149/19 155/23 197/17 198/6 talks [3] 80/5 84/19 86/3
Tam [1] 124/12 tanks [2] 117/11 122/3
target [1] 194/9 tasked [1] 177/10 taskforce [15] 10/3 11/3 19/18 19/23 20/10 20/20 21/5 24/5 145/12 145/13 145/17 146/10 146/13 151/25 200/24
tax [7] 74/25 75/10 76/10 76/16 172/16 173/14 174/18
taxpayers' [1] 210/17 team [5] 1/16 1/16 43/7 43/7 43/8
teams [1] 39/7
technical [1] 69/21 teens [1] 67/9
Tegnell [1] 149/25
tell [12] 34/24 69/22 122/12 124/1 138/25 144/1 157/10 167/17 195/15 197/4 204/25 205/6
telling [4] 61/15 68/7 71/25 92/2
template [2] 19/10 19/11
temporarily [1]
213/15
temporary [7] 126/8
126/20 126/23 126/24 127/2 127/5 190/1
ten [2] 93/3 146/13
ten days [1] 93/3
tend [1] 141/22
tendency [1] 45/20
tens [1] 46/13
term [11] 37/21 46/16
74/16 75/2 75/3 103/2 189/9 189/9 201/4 203/17 207/10
terms [31] 8/1 14/10 14/13 16/20 24/19 27/2 28/12 30/18 45/15 45/21 47/5 51/11 52/17 58/17 60/8 66/24 73/6 74/13 74/18 80/22 83/15 99/2 110/4 110/21 148/25 156/8 158/1 160/10 192/7 214/3 214/15

212/7 212/11 214/3 214/6
tested [1] 211/1
testing [4] 58/18
210/15 212/12 214/5
tests [1] $95 / 22$
text [1] $3 / 9$
texts [1] $3 / 8$
than [40] 4/18 12/13
17/22 23/8 67/14
72/19 76/11 77/12
77/23 81/12 90/23
97/5 100/2 100/6
101/10 102/5 105/19
108/14 115/23 116/24 132/20 134/11 134/15 135/4 137/6 143/21 151/3 172/21 179/1 182/14 182/20 182/23 183/8 188/9 189/2
190/18 193/7 203/25 209/5 214/25
thank [43] 1/19 1/24 1/25 43/7 62/17 107/9 111/18 138/12 162/1 162/25 163/13 168/23 168/24 168/25 169/8 171/4 174/3 174/25 176/20 176/22 176/23 187/13 192/12 192/13 192/17 196/10 196/11 198/7 200/14 200/15 200/18 208/9 208/10 208/11 208/12 215/19 215/20 215/22 215/23 216/1 216/3 216/18 216/19
thank you [34] 1/24 1/25 62/17 107/9 111/18 138/12 162/25 163/13 168/23 168/24 169/8 171/4 174/3 174/25 176/20 176/22 176/23 187/13 192/12 192/13 192/17 196/10 196/11 198/7 200/14 200/15 208/10 208/11 208/12 215/19 216/1 216/3 216/18 216/19 thankfully [1] 205/18 that [1511] that HMT [1] 132/8 that's [112] $4 / 255 / 6$ 6/25 9/14 9/15 10/25 11/15 11/18 13/20 18/24 18/24 19/4 21/24 22/3 22/5 24/2 24/11 25/5 25/7 26/23 28/5 28/5 29/25 30/6 30/8 30/12 31/1 31/14 31/16 33/12 35/14 38/21 42/13 44/22
$47 / 7$ 48/15 49/11 50/8 themselves [15] 4/8 50/8 50/9 51/21 58/12 16/12 61/16 67/4 61/5 63/23 64/20 85/19 89/18 94/22 64/21 64/22 67/8 67/13 71/22 72/21 74/1 80/11 84/12 88/16 90/7 94/22 97/8 then [95] 1/16 2/15 97/14 100/16 103/5 2/16 2/17 4/24 6/11 103/9 104/5 104/7 109/25 110/24 113/19 117/10 123/3 127/11 127/22 131/1 133/1 133/11 133/20 138/3 140/17 141/6 141/25 142/25 145/12 145/16 146/16 147/7 148/8 148/20 151/6 154/6 154/13 155/15 156/12 158/13 159/5 162/22 164/10 168/6 168/8 170/13 174/4 182/5 183/3 186/19 187/7 190/11 190/21 191/18 193/24 198/20 207/25 212/2 212/6 214/21
their [52] $7 / 23$ 49/23 50/5 51/9 67/6 68/10 81/2 82/24 83/3 83/13 83/16 86/2 90/17 91/8 91/9 93/2 101/6 103/18 110/12 111/12 113/11 114/22 117/10 118/15 125/11 129/10 129/21 129/21 131/7 132/10 134/15 135/7 137/7 141/10 150/18 161/4 161/24 168/10 170/10 172/15 172/15 there'd [1] 28/11 172/16 173/14 174/17 there's [36] 21/17 182/16 191/6 199/14 $\quad 21 / 19$ 22/8 25/24 31/7 199/18 199/20 212/20 34/3 36/12 36/13 40/1 214/19 215/9
them [69] 4/12 7/2 9/2 9/9 16/5 18/2 18/3 18/6 22/5 26/17 31/6 33/19 34/2 36/10 51/2 51/10 51/16 54/10 61/13 67/12 67/14 67/15 85/10 92/19 111/24 120/13 120/16 120/19 124/24 124/25 125/5 125/12 127/18 129/5 131/21 132/5 133/9 133/11 139/21 145/16 147/25 161/2 162/7 162/22 162/23 163/20 165/12 165/23 170/1 170/4 170/9 170/15 170/17 170/20 16/3 21/12 22/20 173/2 173/18 182/15 $\quad 23 / 19$ 25/9 25/13 28/2 182/18 182/25 190/24 $33 / 22$ 38/6 38/12 191/23 191/23 196/19 $38 / 14$ 39/13 39/16 199/18 203/9 203/14 $40 / 15$ 46/11 46/12 204/21 206/19 216/14 46/16 47/4 54/11
these... [55] 56/17
58/19 60/16 60/19 60/24 63/11 63/15 65/3 66/18 67/14 69/3 72/22 76/1 80/16 82/10 85/9 89/25 91/11 92/12 92/18 93/22 93/24 103/5 103/8 106/19 123/7 124/2 125/17 129/13 133/23 134/14 135/13 140/21 142/10 142/13 143/18 146/4 146/9 146/16 146/22 152/14 157/23 165/22 166/18 167/25 174/1 179/6 179/21 193/6 193/17 193/22 194/1 194/12 199/6 215/12
they [163] 4/12 5/8 10/23 15/6 16/14 20/25 21/4 21/4 21/7 21/8 21/9 21/13 23/17 24/18 26/15 27/5 29/13 29/16 30/3 35/23 41/13 41/17 46/20 49/23 51/12 51/14 52/3 52/8 52/19 54/7 54/9 54/11 54/12 56/23 61/10 63/13 65/24 66/2 66/3 66/6 66/15 66/21 67/13 68/7 68/8 68/9 70/6 71/15 76/25 76/25 77/6 82/2 82/5 85/24 90/1 91/9 92/22 94/1 95/4 97/1 97/2 97/4 97/6 97/9 97/9 97/10 98/11 99/9 101/22 103/23 104/24 104/25 107/1 108/12 109/5 111/12 119/22 120/14 121/23 122/9 122/9 122/11 124/13 124/14 124/16 124/17 124/22 124/25 125/19 127/20 128/22 129/6 129/20 129/24 130/23 132/6 132/15 133/9 133/10 133/19 134/25 135/6 135/8 135/9 135/11 135/24 136/17 141/20 143/17 149/5 149/14 152/22 155/21 160/17 161/2 161/3 161/8 161/9 162/23 164/23 165/16 165/17 166/13 168/13 170/10 170/11 170/12 170/18 170/19 170/24 170/25 170/25 171/1 171/2 171/3 173/12 173/12 173/13

173/14 173/15 173/16 third [3] 15/24 97/23 181/20 182/16 182/16 177/22
182/18 182/21 182/22 thirdly [1] 108/15 182/24 183/11 188/23 this [267] 191/1 195/9 197/18 Thomas [8] 196/12 199/8 199/17 206/19 196/13 196/15 196/16 208/21 210/12 211/21 $198 / 3$ 198/6 200/15 211/22 213/22 214/22 215/6
they'd [1] 55/15 they're [15] 16/24 21/13 30/3 38/14 38/15 75/12 76/2 76/15 110/1 117/3 133/6 139/22 172/21 185/20 211/10 they've [2] 61/20 124/21
thing [32] 19/4 21/10 42/17 42/22 45/11 46/9 47/16 50/4 57/5 58/8 76/3 85/24 89/3 96/4 99/5 105/13 106/3 114/24 120/24 120/24 122/8 133/16 140/6 141/12 146/2 165/7 191/18 191/24 206/15 209/1 209/23 210/3
things [73] 15/6 20/2 20/12 21/6 21/22 23/19 24/6 26/5 26/10 32/23 33/17 33/22 38/13 38/17 43/1 47/4 49/10 52/2 52/11 54/11 56/18 58/19 66/6 66/9 67/14 69/20 70/23 72/16 72/22 73/15 75/2 76/14 82/23 86/4 95/20 98/13 99/4 100/18 103/7 125/16 127/2 131/12 131/23 133/6 133/23 140/21 143/19 145/15 146/9 146/16 146/23 149/14 150/13 157/23 157/24 160/22 162/22 165/14 165/17 166/19 170/10 179/15 184/20 186/1 186/6 189/10 189/25 190/25 192/4 196/1 198/19 211/18 214/21
things....this [1] 86/17 think [380] think that [1] 33/11 think: [1] 133/19 think: science [1] 133/19
thinking [11] 12/9
44/24 45/15 80/6 81/6 82/3 83/12 134/14
145/25 158/1 194/6

217/17
those [168] 2/2 $2 / 3$ 2/9 4/1 4/14 5/5 7/7 7/21 9/16 11/8 11/21 11/25 13/14 16/3 18/2 18/5 18/11 18/19 19/11 20/16 20/23 21/22 22/16 23/21 24/1 24/12 25/11 26/3 27/5 27/7 28/18 30/2 30/6 33/17 34/22 36/4 36/14 38/19 40/7 44/15 46/5 48/25 49/19 50/3 50/23 52/4 52/6 52/10 52/21 56/20 59/13 60/11 61/7 61/10 62/12 63/12 64/4 67/9 71/22 72/2 73/15 74/12 75/11 76/14 77/22 82/4 82/8 82/12 82/14 82/14 82/22 83/8 85/18 86/4 89/5 89/7 95/3 95/5 106/24 107/7 117/7 117/8 117/10 117/14 119/23 120/11 120/15 120/25 121/2 121/2 121/7 121/11 121/12 122/5 122/9 123/9 124/23 127/13 127/16 127/19 127/21 127/21 128/2 130/22 145/9 145/21 159/13 160/10 162/6 162/8 162/9 162/13 167/15 168/3 168/24 171/22 175/16 176/20 177/8 177/8 178/19 179/12 181/13 181/25 182/23 183/23 183/24 184/6 184/12 184/15 184/16 184/20 185/8 185/19 185/21 186/10 187/2 188/22 189/10 191/1 191/21 192/10 192/21 196/19 197/15 tier [9] 10/18 148/12 197/19 199/4 199/11 $151 / 22$ 152/1 152/8 199/12 199/16 199/25 $152 / 13153 / 19$ 154/9 200/11 203/9 207/13 208/3 208/19 209/9 209/9 209/11 210/11 210/15 210/20 211/9 211/14 213/7 213/20 214/1 214/7
those weeks [1] 52/21
though [9] 32/14

46/7 56/21 136/13 141/18 170/4 179/13 179/16 190/15 thought [21] 2/5 8/23 19/7 19/15 21/22 28/22 32/9 67/14 81/3 97/1 97/2 97/4 97/15 120/23 153/14 159/15 160/17 160/23 180/2 191/24 197/14 thoughts [5] 28/15 40/13 43/2 80/18 162/20
three [23] 24/12 66/6 66/9 98/18 99/7 119/23 120/11 121/6 125/14 136/20 147/17 147/20 154/2 154/3 154/12 159/24 171/19 173/8 173/25 174/14 179/11 194/17 197/2 three days [1] 99/7 three weeks [3] 24/12 147/17 147/20 three years [1] 194/17
through [35] 2/2 3/25 9/24 11/3 11/13 15/2 18/7 20/17 29/15 40/16 41/25 48/2 56/16 74/16 97/10 122/14 136/15 137/15 142/9 142/10 160/24 160/25 161/1 163/25 165/13 171/3 172/15 174/7 176/2 176/12 179/10 190/21 208/3 212/14 213/9
throughout [22] 2/4 5/16 5/23 6/20 7/7 8/17 27/7 27/8 51/18 51/19 83/12 91/6 128/25 158/13 158/14 160/20 162/9 162/19 162/20 178/17 205/16 211/15
Thursday [10] 17/2 68/12 68/21 69/1 69/6 70/8 72/9 72/18 196/20 216/13
thus [1] 21/19
ticking [1] 83/4
$\begin{array}{ll}151 / 22 & 152 / 1 \\ 152 / 13 & 153 / 19 \\ 154 / 9\end{array}$
154/24
tiered [3] 152/10
153/10 154/20
tiering [1] 154/16
tiers [3] 50/16 154/3 154/12
tight [1] 216/14 til [1] 62/19
time [150] 3/19 4/5

4/9 4/20 4/22 4/23 4/25 7/2 7/20 10/9 12/3 12/13 13/11 13/15 15/8 15/16 15/23 16/10 16/21 16/25 19/17 19/20 20/17 21/9 22/8 22/16 24/11 25/20 25/21 26/17 27/2 29/18 35/19 37/17 38/5 38/8 45/3 46/6 47/11 47/15 49/16 50/9 53/25 58/5 58/14 58/20 59/3 60/21 62/15 63/13 63/15 67/4 67/5 67/11 70/17 76/2 82/5 82/14 83/8 84/13 90/20 91/18 93/6 94/11 94/14 94/18 94/21 95/7 96/9 97/16 99/6 99/9 100/25 101/4 107/1 114/14 121/22 122/18 126/16 128/3 128/20 129/1 129/10 130/6 131/11 131/13 131/14 133/12 134/1 134/14 136/14 140/3 145/13 145/17 146/18 148/13 148/14 149/4 149/9 149/13 150/21 152/10 153/19 156/25 157/25 161/1 162/19 162/20 163/7 164/21 165/17 166/17 166/22 167/5 169/25 170/11 173/8 173/9 178/11 178/20 178/24 179/4 185/11 186/2 186/9 186/14 187/11 189/9 189/9 191/4 193/11 196/3 197/8 197/13 197/21 201/17 202/3 202/19 202/20 203/13 205/23 206/22 208/5 211/25 212/15 215/1 215/15 215/16 215/24 216/15
timeliness [1] 58/11 times [13] 3/20 4/24 61/9 105/23 109/19
136/20 173/8 173/25
174/14 179/11 186/6 188/16 204/13
timescales [1]
178/21
timetable [2] 78/25 216/14
timing [12] 54/19 59/15 63/9 65/9 66/2 66/4 66/16 66/17
66/22 68/9 69/2 79/2
titled [1] 126/9
titles [1] 141/18
today [11] 1/21 1/25
today... [9] 2/10 3/5
5/13 12/9 52/12 58/22 75/1 147/7 190/17
Today's [1] 1/4
together [30] 10/5
12/14 20/2 21/15 26/1 28/11 80/6 87/13 108/8 111/21 111/22 111/24 113/12 114/18 115/4 117/1 117/20 122/17 123/12 123/17 124/19 137/19 137/19 145/16 145/25 146/11 198/14 201/11 206/16 207/5
told [13] 27/11 47/22
63/23 102/17 127/24
128/1 144/21 158/25
159/14 179/17 187/23
191/5 196/23
Tom [2] 130/9 130/9
too [12] 6/25 54/10
54/11 63/5 65/7 65/15 67/24 68/9 91/13 94/9 108/24 133/22
took [11] 24/13 31/11
50/14 50/19 51/10
57/22 73/20 114/9
129/22 212/2 214/13
tool [1] 101/7
top [5] 34/8 70/6
138/21 177/17 182/16
topic [13] 22/10
63/18 104/8 163/16
169/14 170/22 171/5
187/19 189/16 189/17
198/24 209/24 212/5
topics [1] 28/3
total [4] 57/12 173/10
173/12 195/17
totality [3] 6/22 7/6 7/21
touch [2] 201/8 201/18
touched [5] 41/15
48/20 178/5 185/5 197/10
touching [1] 6/17
tough [2] 76/2 163/9
tourism [1] 82/11
towards [2] 58/1 109/20
trace [6] 94/16 124/4
212/7 212/11 214/3 214/7
track [9] 41/7 62/11 99/18 104/1 124/4 212/7 212/11 214/3 214/7
trade [15] 21/17 31/3 31/7 31/19 32/2 34/3 35/2 36/17 37/1 47/7

118/15 146/6 198/12 206/12 207/14
trade-off [6] 31/7 32/2 34/3 37/1 206/12 207/14
trade-off,' [1] 31/3
trade-offs [1] 146/6
Trades [1] 208/18
Trades Union [1]
208/18
traditional [1] 15/9
trail [3] 27/15 27/23 28/4
trailing [1] 98/6
trajectory [1] 147/8
translate [1] 59/11 translates [2] 182/7 182/8
transmission [25]
94/19 94/24 94/25
99/10 100/9 100/24
101/1 103/12 112/12 112/17 113/19 114/23 115/3 117/21 118/3
119/9 119/14 122/23 124/15 128/10 133/24 199/24 201/7 203/2 203/8
transparent [1] 142/12
transport [2] 108/8 213/8
travel [1] 28/18
Treasury [94] 1/17 2/18 4/18 6/1 7/25 10/1 10/19 13/15 15/4 17/22 17/22 18/4 32/1 32/9 32/11 32/13 36/22 43/5 69/21 71/5 78/7 78/18 85/3 86/21 90/5 90/13 91/6 95/18 98/19 102/16 102/19 102/24 103/10 104/13 104/19 104/21 105/1 105/2 106/15 108/2 114/20 115/4 118/1 119/10 127/1 129/10 130/8 137/11 137/25 138/4 138/12 138/25 139/11 139/24 140/1 141/5 141/9 142/8 145/8 145/23 146/12 147/12 147/16 160/1 160/3 160/5 160/9 160/15 160/19 162/16 164/10 166/3 166/17 167/24 168/2 170/18 175/11 175/12 175/12 175/16 184/2 187/5 195/5 196/4 201/9 202/5 202/23 205/9 206/2 208/24 209/1 209/21 209/24 210/6 Treasury's [2]

167/19 207/11
treat [1] 61/8 treated [1] 175/10
trick [1] 49/24
tricky [3] 75/25 94/1 132/21
tried [5] 27/14 27/22 70/24 81/16 156/19
tries [1] $47 / 14$
triggered [7] 173/3
173/18 174/7 175/25
179/9 183/13 185/22
triggers [1] 172/19
tripled [1] 69/17
true [1] 140/1
Truss [1] 2/25
truth [1] 1/13
try [13] 10/21 74/9
77/5 77/6 82/16 83/4 108/24 145/15 153/14 184/25 194/18 199/13 202/11
trying [9] 20/25 21/1 77/17 83/15 94/1
105/10 157/21 191/3 197/22
Tuesday [4] 41/7 57/23 91/22 91/23 turmoil [2] 191/19 191/21
turn [3] 161/18
171/11 188/5
turned [4] 54/25 76/4 92/3 157/13
turning [2] 5/11 171/23
twice [1] 136/20
two [32] 13/14 18/23
21/22 24/12 25/23 29/12 29/22 30/11 44/3 48/5 66/19 73/15
76/17 86/19 87/25
88/8 88/15 88/21
95/20 119/25 133/6 133/19 133/19 139/22 147/17 147/20 163/20 uncertain [5] 16/1 166/18 171/7 171/12 180/8 208/20
two weeks [3] 24/12
180/8 208/20
two years [2] 25/23 48/5
type [3] 38/19 85/17 141/11
types [5] 26/3 38/15
38/19 56/17 95/5
typical [3] 29/15
29/18 118/11
typically [2] 19/16
39/16

## u

U-turn [2] 161/18 188/5

UK [41] 60/23 69/11 69/15 77/13 82/21 163/15 169/11 170/6 38/1 179/6 181/4 182/6 182/21 183/9 184/9 185/21 186/1 191/12
UK Government [3] 130/19 182/6 184/9 69/15
UK's [1] 152/25
UK-wide [1] 186/1
UKHospitality [2]
118/16 198/12 44/8 52/24 58/3 60/11 183/22
65/18 91/8 143/4 158/7 158/22
ultimately [25] 9/4
11/22 11/24 18/8 21/20 30/6 40/25 45/7 51/12 55/19 72/4 85/7 102/12 103/12 113/22 158/9 158/12 159/3 188/9 189/8 189/11 214/11
unaddressed [1] 212/1
unanimous [1] 124/13
unanimously [1] 45/25
unattractively [1] 159/25
unaware [2] 101/15 102/20

42/15 131/4 133/17 133/21
uncoiled [1] 63/8
under [6] 43/25
61/25 71/18 72/20
97/17 193/22
underappreciated [3] 133/13 205/25 206/1
underlying [2]
142/20 215/11
underpinning [2] 3/4 53/3
undershot [1] 77/23
understaffing [1] 195/2

125/18 125/18 130/13 $155 / 9$ 189/19 198/14 130/19 143/20 151/13 understandably [1]

170/13 171/14 171/17 understanding [12] 172/2 172/8 172/14 18/10 37/20 41/10 172/17 174/8 174/19 $\quad$ 53/7 55/8 71/21 83/7 175/10 175/12 175/16 $136 / 24$ 137/1 196/5 176/1 176/5 176/10 207/16 214/13 176/14 176/15 177/12 understands [1] UK Governe undertaken [1] 63/5 UK Government's [1] undoubtedly [1] 53/8 205/20
utimate [11] 8/4 9/14 unequal [2] 181/16 194/23 210/12 210/17 universal [3] 176/11
understand [18] 1/22 unsurprising [3]
37/5 48/9 55/9 71/24 46/21 93/8 212/6
74/2 74/4 75/20 84/22 unsurprisingly [3]
unsurprisingly... [3]
71/4 90/14 189/25
until [9] 2/21 41/7
41/12 66/8 66/18
168/1 211/23 212/5 216/21
untoward [1] 45/4
unviable [1] 108/4
unwind [1] 44/13
unwinding [1] 44/9
unwinds [1] 44/1
unwinds/is [1] 44/1
unwound [1] 47/25
up [61] 3/14 4/12
9/21 11/1 11/14 11/17 11/22 17/5 22/2 27/6 35/24 44/21 45/9 49/19 49/20 61/4 64/4 71/14 77/22 79/4 87/18 88/10 89/4 94/6 94/8 100/10 100/25 105/24 108/23 108/24 111/24 112/19 112/20 122/20 125/23 126/2 126/3 126/4 126/13 130/15 130/21 138/15 140/12 144/1 153/6
153/8 156/2 159/7
161/22 162/1 176/18 177/13 180/5 181/8 209/8 212/7 212/11
212/13 214/7 214/11 214/14
update [1] 13/2
updating [1] 79/6
upfront [10] 171/18
173/7 173/24 176/17 179/4 180/11 183/10 183/16 186/2 187/9
uplift [3] 173/21
180/9 188/12
uplifted [5] 171/19
173/8 173/25 174/14 179/11
uplifting [1] 181/5
uplifts [1] 179/12
upon [7] 22/14 52/22
103/11 113/23 150/1
185/11 201/18
upper [1] 131/7
uppermost [1]
162/20
upshot [1] 43/18
upward [1] 147/8
urged [2] 208/24 209/21
urgency [1] 105/17
urging [1] 209/24
us [11] 1/9 25/21
26/4 43/14 68/11
71/15 77/3 94/17
111/15 179/17 197/4
use [13] 12/18 15/7 16/3 45/23 116/13 117/24 127/13 140/5 173/15 182/16 190/25 198/18 200/3
used [10] 3/7 3/11 19/12 70/6 116/2 118/24 144/23 144/24 149/3 195/25
useful [1] 91/15 useless [1] 46/3
user [2] $3 / 235 / 2$
uses [1] 164/18
using [2] 134/23
162/7
usual [2] 1/13 104/22

## V

vaccine [1] 166/11
vacuum [1] 140/9
Vallance [9] 38/16
95/13 98/6 124/11 130/7 138/15 138/17
138/18 196/23
Vallance's [2] 45/23 161/21
valuable [1] 63/13 value [1] 191/1 Van [1] 124/12 Vanessa [1] 130/5 Vanessa MacDougall [1] 130/5
varied [3] 155/21
156/1 157/17
variety [1] 203/11
various [22] 2/4 7/22
9/20 12/5 12/23 14/3
43/4 58/24 74/21 78/7 78/17 84/19 86/12 89/25 95/22 97/17 98/17 166/5 194/13 202/10 202/10 209/18 vast [2] 5/20 52/20
VAT [2] 116/4 123/5 veer [1] 45/20 veering [1] 41/11 vein [1] 175/1
ventilated [2] 37/2 91/12
verbal [1] 136/17 verbally [1] 130/4 versus [2] 47/7 195/25
very [97] 1/14 1/19 2/13 10/8 10/20 12/14 14/18 14/18 15/13
16/7 16/19 20/19
20/25 24/22 27/3
31/14 34/12 34/21 37/15 37/25 53/10 54/4 54/9 58/9 59/6 60/20 61/8 69/8 69/19 71/5 72/22 74/18 78/24 85/20 85/22

86/1 89/12 89/19 90/9 voucher [1] 98/20 91/4 99/14 99/24 vouchers [4] 161/19 101/1 104/9 106/8 190/23 190/23 191/1 106/12 107/12 107/19 vulnerabilities [2] 107/25 108/24 113/17 197/6 198/1 114/6 114/23 116/2 vulnerable [21] 82/12 121/24 122/4 122/18 83/8 84/6 84/10 89/6 122/21 124/6 126/1 $117 / 5$ 118/25 148/8 127/4 129/4 129/9 135/10 139/22 140/10 140/10 140/25 144/20 146/5 146/9 148/8 148/23 148/23 151/22 154/8 155/17 159/10 161/6 162/2 168/25 188/22 189/16 194/15 wait [1] 183/11 196/19 197/23 197/23 waited [1] 58/4 198/13 206/6 206/21 waiting [1] 183/8 208/9 214/11 214/11 Wales [17] 156/19 215/15 215/20 215/22 171/6 171/9 172/6 215/23
via [1] 184/2
view [44] 11/12 18/18 20/15 27/7 41/23 42/7 42/24 46/1 46/21 47/23 47/24 48/10 49/20 49/21 67/6 69/14 72/17 94/8 98/22 109/15 114/5 122/6 127/14 131/17 131/22 134/6 134/7 135/6 136/14 136/21 138/3 140/23 142/5 145/9 152/12 152/16 153/13 158/22 170/23 175/8 189/4 195/5 203/5 209/25
viewed [1] 101/23
views [17] 8/2 9/23 11/23 12/4 79/13 131/16 132/1 132/10 134/7 141/21 150/9 150/18 150/21 151/10 153/10 172/11 175/22 vigorous [1] 46/11 violently [2] 156/10 156/23
virtue [1] 110/20
virus [9] 58/18 65/1 81/12 102/9 124/3 126/4 163/25 192/24 201/25
visit [1] 123/20 vital [2] 40/5 65/9 vividly [4] 53/24 66/12 67/18 175/13 viz [1] 65/3 voice [7] 39/13 39/19 40/6 80/19 93/25 158/9 192/17
voices [1] 129/15 volumes [1] 212/12 voluntary [2] 195/4 195/7

172/20 173/11 174/16 175/7 175/17 175/20 175/24 176/3 176/9 176/13 176/16 179/8 179/23
walks [3] 32/20 33/9 37/22
wall [1] 196/13
want [26] 20/9 27/17
37/4 40/6 41/17 41/22
42/23 70/3 72/11
82/22 82/25 88/19
101/12 110/3 126/23
161/25 162/5 173/16 174/10 174/12 183/9 187/19 191/7 192/21 197/8 199/19
wanted [20] 1/22 2/1 11/6 11/23 32/22 33/18 43/6 51/12 54/7 80/24 106/11 107/3 107/4 116/23 159/7 170/18 171/2 182/2 182/16 182/17
wanting [1] 150/17
wanton [1] 118/8
wants [2] 140/20 151/9
War [1] 74/23
warn [1] 95/13
Warner [2] 132/8 138/15
warning [5] 34/25
67/22 95/17 97/25
205/10
warranted [2] 157/17 158/19
wary [1] 127/1
was [1006]
wasn't [51] 6/23
25/17 31/3 37/1 37/2
42/12 44/11 50/1 50/3
50/8 57/1 57/1 58/10
89/23 93/9 96/16

101/3 103/22 105/13 108/22 113/25 123/12 125/16 127/7 129/23 129/23 130/16 133/20 134/5 136/5 143/10 144/6 144/17 150/6 157/17 160/11 165/21
165/22 166/22 167/17
167/21 168/10 180/11
194/12 204/1 212/1
212/9 212/24 213/6
213/10 215/3
watch [1] 38/9
water [1] 61/24
watered [4] 79/14
79/17 79/21 80/20
wave [3] 125/3 153/1 153/5
way [52] 1/13 1/23 5/18 7/1 7/24 8/14 11/12 11/25 12/18 12/19 18/22 25/7 29/23 30/12 33/4 33/15 41/25 42/13 44/21 50/13 55/17 80/11 90/17 97/6 102/23 105/19 115/16 116/3 118/8 118/11 118/20 125/2 125/12 125/19 127/18 131/21 135/15 142/12 143/1 143/7 144/17 146/16 160/16 176/16 182/6 182/13 186/18 200/17 210/19 210/23 214/17 214/20
ways [5] 2/4 12/24
71/9 72/22 202/11
we [276]
we'd [10] 29/19
54/23 77/10 82/25
105/7 115/9 115/19
153/15 174/13 201/15
we'll [17] 12/22 13/14
16/23 17/6 17/8 24/7 25/1 28/13 48/17
48/21 52/3 62/19 74/5 83/18 125/6 136/3 210/4
we're [16] 1/14 12/2 40/1 48/23 59/21
71/12 71/12 74/25
99/19 125/8 130/22
148/21 149/19 157/18 159/14 174/4
we've [17] 5/8 28/20 37/13 53/11 61/15 81/25 86/22 102/6 135/24 160/6 170/16 185/13 185/19 193/14 202/7 204/10 205/3
weak [1] 149/9
Wednesday [3]
216/13 216/17 216/22

| $\mathbf{W}$ |
| :--- |
| week [8] 58/5 66/14 |
| $69 / 1893 / 3136 / 20$ |
| $136 / 20$ 206/21 $216 / 1$ |
| weekend [5] 26/1 |
| $29 / 1944 / 257 / 2067 / 1$ |
| weekly [1] 13/1 |
| weeks [17] 14/21 |
| $15 / 420 / 2324 / 12$ |
| $24 / 12$ 25/1 48/25 |
| $52 / 2156 / 2563 / 14$ |
| $64 / 488 / 1889 / 1$ |
| $147 / 17147 / 20180 / 8$ |
| $208 / 20$ |
| weigh [1] $35 / 24$ |
| weighed [1] $141 / 20$ |
| weird [1] $26 / 25$ |
| welfare [4] $82 / 13$ |

176/13 197/13 215/8 well [94] 2/13 6/2 7/5 9/9 9/12 9/24 15/13 19/7 19/19 22/24 23/23 25/19 26/5 27/9 27/10 28/5 29/4 29/10 32/6 32/7 32/20 34/7 35/9 40/10 40/23 42/6 42/11 42/24 43/9 45/8 46/23 48/7 49/14 54/15 56/15 58/8 61/4 61/10 61/19 61/20 65/22 66/21 76/6 81/14 84/5 87/20 88/25 88/25 89/8 95/3 99/11 102/12 105/7 106/8 106/19 110/25 111/23 118/5 128/21 129/5 129/23 132/9 134/22 142/17 152/17 153/25 155/5 155/11 161/10 162/19 165/7 167/9 168/14 174/12 174/16 174/23 183/5 186/3 186/25 187/8 187/8 188/7 191/20 192/11 194/18 195/23 196/6 197/10 201/16 201/18 206/21 209/1 215/9 215/24
well-off [1] 84/5
wellbeing [1] 36/3
Welsh [9] 169/13 169/18 169/23 170/22 172/1 174/5 175/14 176/18 179/19

## Welsh Government

[6] 169/13 169/18
169/23 170/22 176/18 179/19
went [11] 18/14 25/22 30/19 51/24 52/3 100/17 113/10 137/5 151/4 164/6 212/14
were [320]
were weeks [1] 14/21
weren't [11] 21/3
27/11 50/20 51/22 70/6 95/3 142/14 148/2 168/12 211/21 212/20
what [189] 2/16 5/24 5/25 6/17 8/5 8/20 10/23 14/9 14/13 14/21 15/14 16/4 17/15 17/19 18/25 21/21 21/25 24/10 24/11 26/7 26/13 27/11 29/5 29/25 30/6 30/16 30/20 31/1 31/16 33/12 33/18 34/11 34/18 34/22 35/14 36/14 37/21 38/5 42/8 44/19 45/12 47/10 50/9 50/9 52/10 53/7 53/12 53/22 54/7 55/8 55/17 55/20 55/22 56/6 56/15 57/10 58/1 58/23 60/7 60/8 60/12 60/17 60/22 61/3 62/2 62/15 63/12 63/13 63/23 65/13 65/17 65/25 66/15 66/15 67/8 68/6 69/24 70/19 70/20 70/22 71/8 71/22 71/24 72/5 72/11 73/11 74/19 75/5 76/4 77/4 77/11 77/21 78/25 79/16 79/22 80/8 80/15 80/18 80/24 81/19 81/19 84/13 85/7 85/21 87/16 88/18 90/12 91/7 91/8 91/8 92/12 92/22 94/3 94/14 95/19 96/12 97/10 97/13 100/5 100/13 106/16 108/6 109/9 109/16 110/3 110/24 112/4 113/20 113/23 116/18 116/21 117/16 119/19 126/22 133/20 134/16 135/16 136/19 137/1 139/3 140/14 144/14 145/5 145/13 145/16 147/8 147/15 152/12 157/6 157/10 158/25 159/5 160/17 161/2 162/18 165/4 165/5 165/18 168/22 172/19 176/1 176/6 177/21 177/24 178/1 179/17 179/20 181/1 181/4 181/22 183/8 183/20 185/15 186/8 188/20 189/4 189/23

190/22 194/16 195/13 $166 / 10$ 169/20 181/2 196/7 197/4 197/24 181/24 190/2 190/2 199/10 199/23 204/16 213/21
205/1 205/25 212/25
what's [1] 58/18
Whately [3] 193/1
193/5 193/9
whatever [8] $8 / 3$
10/22 12/5 97/13
100/7 100/14 102/20 159/16
WhatsApp [5] 3/12 3/13 3/23 4/8 5/2
WhatsApps [4] 3/18 4/7 4/11 68/12
whatsoever [2] 34/23 46/24
when [59] 9/2 10/15 12/3 16/4 18/11 23/12 25/17 25/20 28/21 30/1 38/6 38/10 42/14 47/17 48/9 49/5 49/8 49/11 52/4 59/14 62/2 67/13 68/7 69/3 70/24 72/18 76/3 76/7 77/16 78/2 80/4 85/9 90/1 91/11 103/23 106/20 109/18 114/12 121/18 121/22 131/22 136/2 137/5 156/19 157/14 161/22 166/10 172/17 175/13 185/20 185/22 187/8 190/14 190/25 195/8 204/13 211/24 212/6 212/13
whenever [1] 161/12 where [47] 5/4 8/21 9/22 11/15 12/10 18/11 19/1 21/14 28/22 29/1 29/16 41/6 45/2 45/14 45/14 52/7 53/13 57/13 64/18 65/7 66/6 66/21 67/3 77/6 81/25 83/18 94/1 94/24 99/19 100/22 112/25 122/10 122/10 130/17 137/3 137/4 144/19 149/22 149/22 153/2 155/13 157/4 164/10 170/6 193/9 207/8 208/13
whereby [1] 172/14 whether [42] $8 / 8$ 10/16 37/4 38/16 40/15 46/14 46/14 46/15 46/15 46/16 53/10 55/15 55/18 55/18 56/1 58/4 65/11 70/11 72/4 73/12 103/10 128/4 128/22 135/23 136/7 136/21 137/23 140/23 140/25 151/16 155/1 159/4 159/12 162/5 162/6
which [209] $1 / 12$ 1/18 5/19 5/23 7/24 9/25 12/20 12/24 13/4 14/16 15/5 15/18 17/16 18/21 19/18 20/17 23/18 24/17 25/1 26/15 27/12 29/6 31/19 32/17 36/14 36/24 37/10 38/23 40/7 41/3 41/12 41/17 43/1 43/14 44/10 44/11 44/13 45/16 45/22 46/17 48/7 48/10 48/21 50/20 50/25 51/5 51/10 51/14 52/1 52/16 53/17 53/21 54/3 54/7 54/19 56/2 56/18 57/22 58/1 59/25 60/3 62/9 63/8 63/9 64/11 65/16 66/16 67/2 67/11 68/18 69/7 70/10 71/9 71/10 71/16 72/1 72/2 74/25 75/7 76/17 77/10 78/17 80/4 80/21 81/13 85/15 87/7 87/11 91/15 93/13 93/14 95/2 95/10 95/23 96/18 96/21 96/21 96/23 97/21 97/21 97/22 99/24 100/10 101/1 101/7 101/23 102/23 103/13 103/17 103/21 104/24 104/25 109/3 109/6 110/6 110/19 111/13 111/15 112/4 112/14 114/3 114/3 114/4 114/19 115/10 115/17 whole [10] 36/20 115/25 116/1 116/11 117/25 118/10 119/1 119/13 121/8 124/16 124/17 125/3 128/25 130/1 130/3 132/6 132/25 135/1 136/15 137/17 138/24 139/9 139/13 140/13 140/14 141/16 141/22 142/15 142/21 143/6 143/7 143/13 145/14 149/7 150/3 150/11 151/19 152/8 152/13 154/20 155/10 155/11 156/5 159/2 160/1 161/7 161/8 163/25 164/8 164/9 165/11 166/1 170/8 173/9 173/9 173/11 174/1 176/7 176/13 179/7 180/23 183/20 184/6 185/5

186/14 188/14 190/23 191/8 198/9 198/10 198/12 200/23 201/25 202/25 203/10 204/1 205/17 206/3 206/8 210/9 212/8 212/20 213/16 214/9
whichever [1] 103/24 while [5] 78/19 133/1 134/12 202/9 208/1
whilst [10] 31/25 104/19 106/22 109/12 109/14 124/15 125/21 131/3 147/22 210/4 whip [2] 124/17 162/3
Whitty [6] 38/16 54/22 95/11 98/8 119/3 124/11
Whitty's [1] 148/9 who [61] $2 / 2$ 2/3 9/5 16/10 20/13 30/7 32/5 32/7 45/21 63/19 77/20 77/21 82/12 89/5 90/8 95/9 106/1 117/5 121/20 128/6 129/18 129/19 130/1 130/5 136/18 143/19 146/21 150/22 160/19 160/19 161/19 162/17 162/19 177/8 178/6 181/17 181/19 181/25 183/23 183/24 184/12 184/16 184/16 184/16 185/2 189/1 191/21 193/15 193/22 195/22 197/11 198/15 198/23 199/4 207/9 208/4 209/9 213/7 213/15 213/20 215/8
whoever [2] 29/13 150/7

58/7 91/6 102/7
123/14 127/22 149/10 175/9 183/11 208/2
whose [1] 10/3
why [40] 24/17 26/17
28/2 48/15 72/21 76/7
87/6 89/25 90/7
114/19 114/24 115/2
117/10 119/10 119/17 120/22 120/23 121/18 122/12 122/15 126/7 130/23 135/12 139/9 139/20 141/16 145/23 150/1 150/21 151/17 159/17 162/22 165/11 167/5 169/19 194/6 196/2 196/3 204/1 207/25
wide [2] 154/20
186/1
widely [1] 160/22
wider [4] 43/16 63/10 79/8 132/10
wife [1] $12 / 13$
will [46] 1/18 4/1 7/24 9/19 10/23 14/6 15/15 22/4 28/17 28/24 41/17 41/18 47/9 47/9 48/22 51/1 52/12
52/13 53/11 53/20
58/22 59/19 65/16
71/14 71/15 75/18
79/3 80/14 86/23 98/7 111/12 118/2 136/10 141/13 146/24 153/5 166/9 174/11 186/12 186/21 187/1 192/11 206/9 211/8 214/22 216/10
winning [1] 113/22 winter [4] 120/1
147/2 147/3 192/22 wish [2] 66/23 78/24 wished [2] 12/5 173/13
withdrew [1] 216/4 within [24] 25/12 41/12 78/18 104/24 104/24 115/13 115/21 116/9 118/21 124/9 131/20 131/23 132/20 137/6 141/4 141/15 154/25 170/10 171/8 171/13 175/13 199/24 200/11 200/11
without [8] 79/14
79/21 102/24 104/25 127/19 170/9 172/7 202/7
witness [18] 1/4 1/11 74/20 75/12 75/21 83/21 96/15 111/1 112/21 114/6 121/8 129/5 131/9 171/8 171/13 201/8 201/19 216/4
witnesses [3] 18/23 22/17 22/21
wizard [1] 145/18
women [4] 82/13
116/14 193/12 197/14 won't [3] 75/4 93/4 177/19
wondered [1] 151/17 wondering [1] 178/23
word [5] 10/21 23/4 44/7 128/6 164/18
words [13] $1 / 22$
34/13 34/13 45/24 49/23 68/10 128/17 130/22 136/7 141/24 162/6 162/8 162/9
work [58] 10/12 11/2 worth [8] 70/15 105/6 16/17 19/12 21/6 23/6 26/10 26/11 26/21 27/2 32/9 43/8 48/16 54/5 58/6 76/25 77/1 77/6 77/21 77/23 83/8 89/6 90/17 111/2 118/12 118/18 134/19 148/13 152/11 152/15 154/9 155/4 156/7 156/19 157/1 157/12 157/20 165/2 168/12 174/9 174/22 181/17 181/19 181/25 183/24 184/16 184/22 193/24 wound [2] 44/21 194/23 198/17 200/2 202/12 208/4 208/4 208/4 208/7 212/21 213/22
work-related [2] 26/10 26/11 worked [16] 17/25 19/6 32/8 54/20 106/8 written [8] 1/15 27/24 117/5 141/9 160/19 160/20 186/3 186/20 187/8 187/8 193/7 193/11 197/11
workers [9] 163/17
163/23 165/1 192/22 193/22 194/4 197/6 198/1 199/3
workers' [1] 164/9 workforce [6] 148/8 165/10 166/21 167/12 181/21 193/12
workforces [1] 198/16
working [24] 12/14 18/6 22/24 58/1 77/20 79/6 82/14 96/2 96/3 99/16 100/20 127/12 136/22 138/23 138/25 160/14 161/24 167/7 191/6 193/12 195/3 197/13 210/17 213/8 workings [1] 40/5 workplace [5] 194/20 201/1 202/24 203/18 207/8
workplaces [1] 199/6
works [9] 12/1 22/5
141/7 170/14 172/23 174/24 182/14 183/4 183/5
world [5] 74/23
108/16 110/2 142/16 190/7
World War II [1] 74/23
worried [1] 54/11
worry [1] 75/17
worrying [2] 70/18 71/5
worse [2] 46/22 47/2

110/8 157/20 159/8
168/6 213/16 213/19
would [233]
wouldn't [29] 5/1
8/16 9/18 21/3 26/2
26/9 35/6 39/16 40/21
54/5 56/2 61/12 83/5
103/1 116/6 123/4
124/7 124/16 125/15
142/7 147/18 152/11
156/17 170/9 170/12
197/18 197/21 199/12
214/24

205/21
write [7] 28/14 28/21
44/17 79/24 80/8
80/25 103/3
writes [1] 210/24
writing [2] 75/17 103/1

28/8 28/8 28/13
181/11 216/9 216/15
wrong [15] 22/7 22/9 33/14 42/4 44/25 52/9 61/19 81/17 147/23
148/22 151/5 151/11
151/15 158/23 164/23
wrong.' [1] 81/18
wrote [4] 32/7 86/9 108/18 109/1
yeah [13] 12/8 24/16 24/21 28/25 64/7
68/25 70/9 88/4 99/13 135/16 148/17 155/7 178/12
year [6] 54/7 116/25 130/13 189/18 213/16 213/19
years [12] 2/6 3/21 4/24 25/23 48/5 74/22 85/25 86/7 87/3 87/3 90/14 194/17
yes [87] $1 / 253 / 23 / 17$ 4/17 4/18 7/13 10/10 14/18 20/22 25/17 26/9 26/20 31/16 34/7 34/10 39/5 55/13 64/1 65/8 65/10 66/14 67/9 67/19 69/2 69/7 70/15 70/22 73/5 73/24 74/20 80/3 85/14 86/14 87/15 88/11 88/18 91/16 92/12 92/25 96/2 98/24 99/20 103/15 104/18 105/6 105/16 106/14 106/24 108/4 109/4 109/10 110/1 123/15 129/4 130/11 131/9

136/12 138/8 142/17 142/25 143/3 148/1 149/2 154/5 154/18 154/23 156/22 165/25 167/25 173/22 173/24 174/21 179/16 180/8 182/4 184/13 197/9 202/13 202/16 202/19 202/20 203/12 205/22 205/24 207/1 207/4 214/13
yet [3] 48/20 93/13 136/2
York [1] 1/17
Yorkshire [1] 2/14 you [642]
you know [55] 18/24 20/11 21/2 23/6 25/21 25/25 26/2 27/3 28/18 33/1 33/6 33/20 36/1 42/4 42/25 47/5 47/6 49/14 51/13 52/10 54/1 54/2 56/16 57/1 58/19 59/8 60/15 61/13 62/10 63/17 64/13 67/9 75/6 76/10 77/20 96/5 97/4
100/16 131/12 136/3
136/4 138/20 144/17
145/15 151/8 152/22 165/7 172/15 183/25 185/25 186/14 188/7 201/9 201/16 206/21
you'd [3] 67/12 88/18 122/17
you'll [15] 1/23 14/21 15/14 17/19 63/10 67/18 69/4 85/12 101/7 105/9 107/21 114/15 119/3 149/23 161/16
you're [19] 24/4
28/11 34/11 42/14 47/17 54/15 56/4 59/10 60/25 61/19 66/7 76/3 77/8 117/3 135/13 155/23 167/20 191/11 195/24
you've [32] 18/8 24/21 25/7 30/16 50/12 52/5 57/19 68/8 74/18 75/17 83/18 89/13 93/23 116/21 127/10 130/2 134/22 137/25 153/17 169/15 170/21 171/12 174/16 177/5 178/5 178/21 179/17 185/11 190/20 195/18 209/18 215/16 young [1] 83/9 your [134] $1 / 8$ 1/9 1/16 3/4 3/7 3/8 4/10 5/9 5/13 5/14 8/2 8/10 12/4 12/22 13/7 14/7

14/16 18/10 22/13 25/8 26/7 27/20 29/2 29/6 35/1 35/4 38/24 39/8 39/18 39/19 40/6 41/4 42/3 50/13 51/3 51/7 52/15 52/16 53/2 53/2 58/25 59/4 59/12 59/25 60/2 64/17 68/21 71/25 72/5 73/13 74/2 74/5 74/10 75/15 75/21 76/18 76/22 78/2 78/6 78/16 78/24 80/17 80/17 80/18 80/19 81/19 83/10 83/19 83/21 84/10 86/11 86/25 87/21 88/24 90/21 91/21 96/24 98/4 101/14 102/17 103/13 104/10 109/14 114/6 114/11 116/21 118/5 120/4 121/7 121/10 128/6 128/9 130/5 130/10 130/24 132/1 133/2 137/21 139/3 139/7 143/24 145/9 152/12 155/9 157/6 158/9 158/22 164/11 165/4 166/15 169/15 170/23 171/13 171/13 174/16 178/23 185/10 185/11 189/4 189/19 192/15 192/16 193/14 193/19 194/3 197/3 198/6 199/2 201/5 201/19 205/12 210/23 211/9 216/2
yourself [10] 18/18
29/2 31/11 31/24
36/21 44/5 79/19 106/18 150/20 186/23

## Z

zero [2] 20/11 193/11

